

The Flawed Case for Nuclear Disarmament

Charles L. Glaser

Whether nuclear disarmament would enhance US security has been debated since the dawn of the nuclear age. Even so, during the Cold War there was a wide consensus that the United States needed to rely on nuclear weapons for deterring Soviet aggression. Nuclear disarmament was not a realistic possibility, given the competitive and often hostile political interactions that constituted the Cold War, even though the dangers posed by nuclear weapons were recognised to be enormous.¹

With the elimination of the geopolitical competition that fuelled the nuclear arms race, broad-based, sustained interest in nuclear disarmament has grown significantly.² In the last few years, experts from a diverse array of backgrounds – former military leaders, distinguished foreign diplomats, prominent scientists, defence intellectuals and academics – in a number of highly visible, independent studies and pronouncements have concluded that the goal of complete nuclear disarmament should play a far more important role in US policy.³ Although Washington has committed itself, in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which entered into force in 1970, to ‘pursue negotiations in good faith on measures relating’ to nuclear disarmament, this commitment has not influenced actual policy. These recent studies conclude that disarmament should now play an important, possibly central role in shaping US nuclear policy. In varying degree, the reports and recommendations are cautious, but their enthusiasm for eventually eliminating nuclear weapons is clear. For example, while recognising the difficulty of the task, one major project concludes:

The ultimate objective of US national security policy should be the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction from all states – not the preservation of nuclear deterrence in perpetuity. This goal should frame our thinking about nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and should influence our planning, both in the near- and long-term.⁴

Although these studies contribute to the debate over US security policy by ensuring that the very foundations of its Cold War policy will be carefully

Charles L. Glaser is Associate Professor, the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies, University of Chicago, IL.

reconsidered, the case for nuclear disarmament is weaker than they suggest. In broad terms, these studies argue that disarmament will: reduce the probability of nuclear war between current nuclear powers; eliminate the possibility of accidental and unauthorised use of nuclear weapons; and contribute to preventing nuclear proliferation. I argue that the first argument is wrong, that the second exaggerates the benefits, and that the third is correct, but for reasons these studies overlook.

Analyses that conclude that nuclear disarmament will reduce the probability of deliberate nuclear war tend to confuse a political problem with a military one. A prerequisite for nuclear disarmament is that the nuclear powers have achieved excellent, robust political relations. If political relations remain sufficiently good, the probability of rearmament and then nuclear war would be very low. However, if relations are this good, the probability of nuclear war could be just as low in a nuclear-armed world. If relations sour following disarmament, then states are far more likely to rearm and nuclear war is more likely during this rearmament phase than in a well-designed nuclear world. Consequently, disarmament would increase the probability of deliberate nuclear war. Most important, perhaps, disarmament would neither produce nor preserve the outstanding relations required to make it feasible. In fact, political relations would be more fragile in a disarmed world: if relations become strained, a downward spiral is more likely to continue in the disarmed world, thereby further increasing the probability of deliberate nuclear war.

Second, proponents of nuclear disarmament exaggerate its role in reducing the probability of accidental and unauthorised use of nuclear weapons. They argue, correctly, that disarmament would eliminate the dangers that exist today, which are particularly worrisome due to serious problems in the Russian command-and-control system. However, there are measures short of disarmament that promise to greatly reduce, although possibly not eliminate, these dangers. Moreover, if a rearmament race were to occur, the danger of accidental use would be greater than it is today.

Third, proponents of disarmament have overlooked the most powerful link between disarmament and non-proliferation. Many proponents argue that disarmament is necessary to preserve the NPT, and some also argue that disarmament will contribute to the devaluing of nuclear weapons. Far more important, however, is that by disarming, the nuclear powers would make nuclear proliferation far more threatening than it is today. By leaving themselves and their allies highly vulnerable to nuclear coercion, they would become willing to launch conventional wars – very large ones if necessary – to prevent the development of nuclear weapons. The fact that threats to launch preventive war would be credible would contribute to the deterrence of nuclear proliferation. Moreover, if deterrence failed, the major powers would be more willing to band together to forcibly prevent or reverse proliferation.

Although disarmament would therefore bring some benefits, overall the case is not compelling. The probability of deliberate nuclear war between major powers would increase. The likelihood of unintended nuclear war could be at least greatly reduced by measures far short of disarmament. Disarmament's key

benefit would be to make proliferation less likely, but it achieves this primarily by making proliferation more dangerous. Finally, disarmament cannot contribute to current non-proliferation challenges, because it remains politically infeasible. Consequently, current enthusiasm for disarmament should not be allowed to distract attention from a variety of other – often quite ambitious – proposals for changes in US nuclear doctrine and forces that are desirable and feasible.

Disarmament and the Risks of War Between Current Nuclear Powers

Disarmament will not reduce the probability of conventional war between major powers that currently possess nuclear weapons.⁵ Proponents do not claim otherwise. Instead they focus on disputing the standard argument that the enhanced deterrent capabilities provided by nuclear weapons played a central role in supporting peace during the Cold War. Debate hinges on how much more likely conventional war would have been during that period if nuclear weapons had not existed. This discussion does not require engaging that debate, but instead only noting that the case for nuclear disarmament cannot be built on its prospects for reducing the probability of conventional war.⁶

Consequently, a central strand of the argument for disarmament must be that it will reduce the probability of nuclear war between current nuclear powers. Proponents tend to imply that disarmament will bring this result, but provide little analysis that actually supports it. In fact, disarmament is likely to increase the probability of nuclear war between disarmed states.⁷

If disarmament meant permanently disinventing nuclear weapons, then clearly it would reduce the likelihood of nuclear war. Many observers – maybe even a large majority of experts and non-experts alike – would prefer this world to a world with nuclear weapons. They would choose a non-nuclear world even if the probability of conventional war was increased, because they would judge that the benefits of eliminating the possibility of nuclear war would exceed these conventional risks. But this is not the choice we face. The real disarmament question is fundamentally different precisely because disarming will not eliminate the possibility of rebuilding nuclear arsenals. Favouring the disinvention of nuclear weapons does not therefore lead automatically to support for nuclear disarmament.

Because nuclear arsenals could be rebuilt, much of the effort in establishing a disarmament regime would involve designing arrangements to provide states with confidence that they would be secure in the disarmed world. The most obvious requirement is that cheating be effectively monitored. However, effective monitoring would not be sufficient. If one country can rebuild faster than others, then it could have incentives to rebuild, even if monitoring were highly effective. Disarmament would therefore have to be designed to enable states to rearm at essentially equal rates.⁸

In addition to a carefully designed rearmament plan, disarmament would have to wait until the disarming powers had achieved extremely good political relations. First, designing and monitoring disarmament would require high

levels of cooperation, since extremely intrusive inspection would be required to provide confidence in the disarmament regime's design. Only states that were on the best of political terms would be willing to accept it. Second – and more important – even with such extensive cooperation, disarmament could be militarily dangerous, since a country that gained even a small lead in rearmament would have a powerful military advantage. Few, if any, major powers – especially those that cannot count on allies for their protection – would be willing to risk allowing another state to acquire a nuclear monopoly, unless their political relations were so good that the possibility of an adversarial relationship had become non-existent.

Disarmament would also require that all non-nuclear states with the potential to build nuclear weapons, but which fall under the nuclear umbrella of a current nuclear power – including but not limited to Germany and Japan – feel highly secure in a disarmed world. Thus, their relations with all current and potential nuclear powers would have to be excellent and robust. Otherwise, these states would face increased pressures to build nuclear arsenals and could well be the first states to violate the disarmament regime.

As long as political relations remained so good, disarmament could not significantly reduce the probability of major-power war. Under these political conditions, states would not get into crises, and would not fight conventional or nuclear wars, whether or not they deployed nuclear weapons. Therefore, under these conditions disarmament would avoid wasting scarce resources, but would not increase states' security.

The impact of disarmament on nuclear war thus hinges on how well it would work once political relations began to deteriorate. Deteriorating relations would probably lead states to rearm – if good political relations are required to make disarmament possible, strained relations would make it too dangerous to sustain. Even if states continued to allow intrusive monitoring arrangements, doubts about the quality of monitoring capabilities and the equality of rearmament capabilities – acceptable when relations were excellent – would soon become unacceptable.⁹ Disarmament might survive a limited period of strained relations, but is unlikely to survive a severe crisis and – even less likely – a conventional war. Unfortunately, this is precisely when disarmament would be most critical, since nuclear war is unlikely to occur during normal peacetime conditions. It is more likely to occur once states are engaged in a crisis, and most likely as escalation of a conventional war. In other words, under the conditions in which nuclear war is a serious possibility, disarmament would probably collapse into a rearmament race.

So, is deliberate nuclear war more likely when states are engaged in a rearmament race or when they already possess nuclear forces? A variety of considerations suggest that the rearmament race is more dangerous. The race may show that the disarmament regime was poorly designed, allowing one state to gain a nuclear monopoly. The nuclear state might then use its nuclear advantage to compel the end of a conventional war, or to destroy the adversary's nuclear-rearmament capability, even though the disarmament regime was

supposedly designed to deny this option. Alternatively, the rearmament race might result in uncertainty about the status of nuclear capabilities. A state, mistakenly believing that it had a monopoly, might use nuclear weapons only to learn that its adversary had also been able to rebuild quickly. Once rearmament begins, the best scenario is that all countries will be deterred from using nuclear weapons by the others' redeployment of nuclear weapons or the promise of forthcoming deployments, thus returning safely to a nuclear world.

In contrast, the nuclear world promises to avoid all of these asymmetries and vulnerabilities. Nuclear war could still occur, but not because states face windows of opportunity or vulnerability, because they fear that they would lose an arms race, or because they underestimate the adversary's nuclear capability. Nuclear deterrence would have to fail for some other reason – for example, because leaders act irrationally – but this seems just as likely in the formerly disarmed world.

Proponents are likely to offer four responses, but none scores many points for disarmament.

- *Enhancing political relations.* First, proponents will argue that disarmament would enhance the prospects for preserving extremely good political relations. Consequently, simply assuming that relations become strained and then assessing the probability of nuclear war is biased against disarmament, since strained relations are less likely in the disarmed world. This argument raises an important point, but the argument actually cuts in the opposite direction – disarmament is likely to contribute to deteriorating political relations.

As long as political relations are very good, military forces will not play an important role in influencing future relations. Once political relations reach the level required for disarmament, states will not need to explore others' military policies to identify potential threats. Just as the US does not currently look to British or French nuclear forces to judge their political motivations and intentions, it would not rely on other major powers' military forces as indicators of their intentions. Thus, as long as geopolitical and other non-military factors allow political relations to prosper, good relations are as likely to continue in a nuclear world as in a disarmed world.

If, however, relations begin to deteriorate, then military forces will start to re-exert some influence on political relations. States will worry about whether others can acquire military advantages and whether they are trying to do so. In this situation, a nuclear world has significant advantages: when states have large retaliatory capabilities, differences in force size are not militarily or politically significant; and deployed forces can be unthreatening, since all major nuclear powers can maintain necessary deterrent capabilities without threatening others' deterrent capabilities.¹⁰ Nuclear weapons thus create the possibility of eliminating the security dilemma, enabling states to meet their military requirements without straining political relations.¹¹

Disarmament would probably lack this valuable property. Because small differences in rearmament could have large implications, a souring of political relations would force states to view their adversary's rearmament capabilities

through an increasingly conservative lens. Potential asymmetries that were previously overlooked would become sources of concern, generating questions about an adversary's political intentions, as well as its military capabilities. Furthermore, states would find it difficult not to respond to deteriorating relations by pressing the limits of the disarmament regime to ensure that if a race were to begin they would not be at a disadvantage, thereby reinforcing their adversaries' worst fears. In short, whereas a nuclear world can insulate political relations from military policy, a disarmed world is likely to reinforce a downward spiral in such relations.

This point is overlooked by proponents of disarmament who argue that the end of the Cold War has created a special opportunity that must be seized quickly, because the greatly improved relations among the nuclear powers are unlikely to endure. Disarmament is an especially bad idea if the prospects for preserving excellent relations are poor. Contrary to the proponents' call for urgent action, disarmament should be considered an attractive possibility only when there is no time pressure to accomplish it. If states should ever pursue nuclear disarmament, it would only be when the prospects for achieving disarmament seem at least as likely to prevail in the future as at the time they decide to disarm.

- *Detering nuclear rearmament.* Second, disarmament proponents argue that states would not launch a nuclear rearmament race if relations become strained, nor even if crises and conventional war occur, because the prospect of their potential adversaries responding would deter such a race. Potential adversaries would have this deterrent capability, according to proponents, because disarmament would be designed to ensure that states could not gain military advantages by breaking out of the disarmament agreement.

Although this argument is reasonable, it is paralleled and undermined by an even more powerful argument: all else being equal, in a nuclear-armed world states would not choose to use nuclear weapons. If a state would decide against initiating rearmament, in the hope of avoiding a rearmament race in which it might fall behind, then why would it use nuclear weapons when involved in a severe crisis or conventional war? Nuclear weapons would be primarily a means of generating risks and bargaining over the conflict's outcome. A state that was willing, in the nuclear world, to escalate a conflict to nuclear use would almost certainly be willing, in the disarmed world, to escalate the conflict by launching a rearmament race. In addition, this state would be unwilling to let its adversary take the initiative in pursuing the major military advantages that rearmament might provide. Consequently, if crises or conventional wars did not generate a dangerous rearmament race in the disarmed world, then it seems even more likely that they would not generate escalation to nuclear war in the nuclear-armed world.

- *Preventing nuclear accidents.* Third, proponents argue that disarmament is required to eliminate the possibility of accidental and unauthorised use, and the theft, of nuclear weapons. At present, these dangers appear much greater for

Russian than US nuclear forces; this is because of weaknesses in the Russian command, control and warning system and poor morale in the Russian military. To support their case, proponents point to the variety of accidents that occurred during the Cold War. However, looking back at that era exaggerates this risk because the superpowers' nuclear doctrines made avoiding accidents unnecessarily difficult. Both US and Soviet nuclear doctrines called for targeting the other's nuclear forces and attacking either first or a quick second.¹² These counterforce doctrines and force postures created severe time pressures for launching nuclear attacks. These pressures were the root cause of most potential accidents.¹³

Fortunately, the nuclear powers can and should adopt doctrines and force postures that would greatly reduce, if not virtually eliminate, the danger of accidents. Doctrines that do not call for targeting the adversary's nuclear forces, nor plan to deter by responding quickly to nuclear attacks, would greatly reduce pressures to react quickly and, therefore, would reduce the already low probability of responding incorrectly to erroneous warning of attack.¹⁴ In addition, partly because political relations have improved, the alert rates of US and Russian nuclear forces, which have been reduced since the end of the Cold War, could be further reduced. Possible measures include such ambitious steps as separating nuclear warheads from their delivery vehicles.¹⁵ Disarmament proponents have strongly supported these measures, which they see as a step along the route to disarmament. Although how far to go with reducing alert rates remains an open question, there is no doubt that the dangers of accidental launch could be greatly reduced, and probably virtually eliminated, without achieving the level of political relations required for nuclear disarmament.

The danger of unauthorised use and theft of nuclear weapons could be much reduced by cutting the size of nuclear forces. The impact of reductions would be more than proportional to their size, since the remaining weapons should be those with the best safety and security features.¹⁶ As a result, although not as effective as disarmament, the very deep cuts that are now being proposed – either as steps towards disarmament or as the final goal of restructuring the major powers' nuclear forces – would go a long way towards eliminating these dangers.¹⁷

It is also possible that disarmament could *increase* the probability of accidental and unauthorised use. If disarmament broke down and a rearmament race ensued, states would not give priority to the inclusion of safety mechanisms in their new nuclear weapons or recreating an effective command-and-control system; simply reacquiring a nuclear arsenal as quickly as possible would be the essential task.¹⁸ Consequently, the arsenals of rearming states are more likely to be used unintentionally than today's nuclear forces and are still more likely to be used unintentionally than the safer systems that can be created under current political conditions.

- *Minimising nuclear damage.* Fourth, proponents argue that disarmament might reduce the probability of nuclear war, or the damage it would cause,

should it occur, because states might be unable to rearm or build large nuclear arsenals before crises or conventional wars were terminated. This argument is sound, so we need to explore the significance of this set of scenarios. A key variable is how quickly states could rebuild nuclear weapons. If it would take years, then the window for ending a conflict would be wide, and disarmament would be more likely to make nuclear damage impossible. If, however, as seems more likely, it would take months, not years, then disarmament is less promising, since large conflicts (which are the ones that create the greatest risk of nuclear escalation in a nuclear world) would probably not be resolved this quickly.¹⁹ Because rebuilding a large arsenal would take longer than building several weapons, the prospects are somewhat better for terminating a nuclear war before large arsenals could be used. Thus, disarmament is more likely to reduce the costs of an all-out nuclear war than to make nuclear escalation impossible.

Another issue concerns states' expectations about the coming conflict – if serious political conflict is foreseeable, then they may begin rearming before a severe crisis erupts, reducing the prospects for resolving the crisis or terminating the war quickly enough to make nuclear war impossible or less damaging.

In addition, the difference between the possession of nuclear weapons and their use should be distinguished: a well-designed nuclear world creates powerful incentives for states to limit the use of nuclear weapons, if nuclear war occurs. In other words, deterrence should limit damage; nuclear wars need not – in fact, should not – be unlimited wars in which all deployed weapons are used. Many of these incentives for restraint would be absent from a rearming world. As a result, equating nuclear damage with the size of arsenals exaggerates the benefits of disarmament. Finally, if disarmament can reduce the costs of war, it would be able to do so only once – having experienced a conflict that launched a rearmament race, states would likely be unwilling to disarm again. Consequently, disarmament might make nuclear war impossible once, but states would probably then return to a nuclear-armed world for good.

In sum, contrary to proponents' hopes, disarmament appears more likely to increase than decrease the probability of nuclear war between current nuclear powers. While it would reduce the probability of nuclear escalation in a limited set of scenarios, disarmament has two major drawbacks: it could contribute to a downward spiral if political relations begin to sour; and rearmament races promise to be more dangerous than deployed forces. Because nuclear weapons would present virtually no danger as long as political relations remained good enough to make disarmament possible, nuclear powers should focus on creating and preserving such good relations. The overriding importance of political relations counts against disarmament, since disarmament itself would be a barrier to political progress.

Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

The second central strand of the disarmament case argues that nuclear disarmament will significantly bolster efforts to prevent further proliferation of

nuclear weapons. Proponents emphasise two related arguments. First, if the nuclear powers do not disarm, they risk undermining the NPT and its norm against proliferation. Second, disarmament will reveal the limited value of nuclear weapons, thereby convincing potential proliferators that they are not essential to achieve either security or international status.

Both arguments have merit, but also important limitations. The argument that disarmament is required to preserve the NPT focuses on the nuclear-weapon states' commitment in Article VI of the Treaty to pursue good-faith efforts to achieve nuclear disarmament. It seems unlikely, however, that disarmament by the nuclear-weapon states will play a decisive role in many countries' decisions about whether the NPT regime continues to serve their interests. As long as non-nuclear-weapon states prefer a world in which they forego nuclear weapons in exchange for their regional adversaries doing likewise, they will believe that the NPT serves their security interests. Whether the nuclear-weapon states disarm would rarely, if ever, tip the balance in this calculation. That said, it is not impossible that there are some states in which the debate over whether to pursue nuclear weapons is fairly evenly divided, and serious commitments to disarmament by the nuclear powers could significantly strengthen the position of opponents of going nuclear. If these cases exist, then disarmament would provide non-proliferation benefits. At the same time, it seems likely that the states whose potential proliferation creates the greatest concern are precisely those that are most isolated from international pressures and that have tended to flaunt international norms – for example, Iraq and North Korea – and are therefore least likely to be influenced by preserving or strengthening the NPT.

The arguments about devaluing nuclear weapons are even weaker. Nuclear weapons may have symbolic and prestige value for some states, but they are certainly neither necessary nor sufficient to obtain international respect or success. Some of the most influential and successful states do not have nuclear weapons. In addition, the NPT regime has already eliminated much, if not all, of nuclear weapons' prestige value. Thus, disarmament is not necessary to politically isolate new proliferators, unless it is necessary to preserve the NPT, which – as argued above – seems quite unlikely.

Probably more important, disarmament is unlikely to convince potential proliferators that nuclear weapons lack military value. The current declared nuclear states, especially the US, are large and/or secure. Even so, they would be unwilling to disarm until their political relations were extremely good, as already discussed. States that are smaller and/or less secure would probably see themselves in radically different circumstances; therefore, disarmament by the current nuclear powers would teach them little about the military value of nuclear weapons. Whereas the US can expect to prevail in a conventional war, most potential proliferators will either lack this confidence or expect to lose. A potential proliferator could thus argue that the US can afford to disarm because its security does not depend on nuclear weapons. By the same logic, a would-be proliferator might conclude that its own security depends on acquiring nuclear

weapons. In fact, some potential proliferators may see disarmament, and the associated pressures for non-proliferation, as an attempt by the conventionally powerful states to protect their ability to prevail against weak states.

Still worse, some potential proliferators will see disarmament as *increasing* the military value of nuclear weapons, since a small number of such weapons would then provide a valuable nuclear monopoly. For example, states with regional expansionist ambitions might become more interested in acquiring nuclear weapons because they could be used more effectively to achieve these objectives. The non-proliferation arguments offered by proponents of disarmament, then, are not especially compelling.

However, there is one powerful link between disarmament and non-proliferation. By making proliferation much more threatening, disarmament would greatly increase the major powers' willingness to use conventional force – on a massive scale, if necessary – to prevent proliferation. Similarly, it would increase global support for such actions. This would enhance the major powers' ability to deter potential proliferators, as well as increasing their ability to launch preventive conventional war if deterrence failed.

This argument for disarming starts from the observation that although the nuclear powers currently have the capability to prevent proliferation by smaller and weaker powers, they are nevertheless generally unwilling to use conventional force for this purpose. Apparently, although proliferation is widely considered a great threat to national security, it has not been considered sufficiently dangerous to warrant the military costs of fighting a large conventional war. Although the end of the Cold War has reduced the risks of launching preventive conventional war (previously the superpowers had to consider the escalatory risks of attacking an ally of the opposing superpower), the barriers to launching such a war remain high. For example, it seems unlikely that Washington and its allies would have launched a massive conventional war to destroy Iraq's nuclear programme if Iraq had not first invaded Kuwait. Therefore, this argument continues, the major powers must somehow increase their willingness to incur the costs required to ensure that determined proliferators will fail.

Disarmament provides the answer. By placing themselves at great risk, the current nuclear powers can change their own security calculations. Disarmament would leave all countries vulnerable to the political demands of a successful proliferator. Whatever danger proliferators pose today would be far greater in a disarmed world. Even though the previously nuclear states would eventually be able to rebuild nuclear weapons, they would be unwilling to accept a period during which a proliferator enjoyed a nuclear monopoly.

In this approach to non-proliferation, the nuclear powers would make their willingness to use conventional force to prevent proliferation an explicit component of their willingness to disarm. Because potential proliferators would understand the risks the nuclear powers were running, threats to launch conventional preventive war would be credible and potential proliferators would be more likely to be deterred. Because the major powers would also

understand the risks, they could be more confident of joining forces to destroy the proliferator's nuclear-weapon programmes if deterrence failed.

Disarmament would support this non-proliferation strategy in two additional ways. First, it would necessarily be accompanied by a highly intrusive inspection plan in all countries, which would provide the disarmament regime's protectors with high confidence that they would know whether a state was in the process of building nuclear weapons. Second, disarmament would legitimise the use of conventional force – on a massive scale, if necessary. Although the current non-proliferation regime serves the interests of most states, using force to preserve the regime nevertheless raises questions of legitimacy, because the regime is inherently discriminatory. Even though the use of conventional force would violate the proliferator's sovereignty, disarmament would reduce these concerns about legitimacy, both by establishing a non-discriminatory regime and by requiring that all states join the regime before it entered into effect. Proliferators would therefore be violating their commitment not to acquire nuclear weapons. The global disarmament agreement could even include a provision authorising states to use conventional force to prevent any one from breaking out of the regime.

Whether the US should turn to disarmament as a way to prevent proliferation depends on a variety of risks and benefits. The most obvious type of risk is that cheating might go undetected. The details of the monitoring regime would influence the prospects for timely warning: if the disarming states exaggerated the regime's effectiveness, a proliferator could build a small arsenal and gain a nuclear monopoly before they could react. There is also the possibility that the US and other major powers would overestimate their willingness to launch a preventive conventional war. If the prospective proliferator protects its nuclear infrastructure and deploys a large conventional military capability, then preventive war could be very costly. The hypothetical future danger of a nuclear arsenal still in the early stages of development might suddenly pale given the high immediate costs of conventional war. Reluctance could also be reinforced by the problems of openly violating the potential proliferator's sovereignty. In other words, while disarming would increase the probability that states would launch preventive war, it does not guarantee it, which makes disarmament a risky non-proliferation strategy at best. The risks for Washington are also reinforced by the likely negative effects of disarmament on the prospect for continuing peaceful relations between itself and other major powers.

The benefits of using disarmament in support of non-proliferation policy depend on the likely success of alternative and more standard approaches for preventing proliferation – including technical barriers to the acquisition of nuclear material, and security guarantees – that are currently employed. The more countries that want to acquire nuclear weapons and the less likely these standard approaches are to succeed in thwarting them, the stronger the case for disarmament. The possibility of less standard approaches should also be considered. Specifically, since disarmament contributes to non-proliferation by

increasing the probability of conventional preventive war, it is reasonable to consider whether turning to preventive war without disarming is a better alternative. The greater the political feasibility of preventive war without disarmament, the smaller the relative benefits of disarmament as non-proliferation policy. Moreover, whatever its potential effectiveness, disarmament cannot help with *current* proliferation problems, because – for the foreseeable future – the nuclear powers will not have sufficiently good relations to make disarmament feasible.

Finally, the benefits of using disarmament to prevent proliferation will depend on the extent of the dangers posed by proliferation. While this is not the place to review the ongoing debate on this question, two points need to be highlighted. First, pessimists who see great dangers in proliferation should be more inclined to pursue a risky non-proliferation strategy based on disarmament than proliferation optimists. Obviously, analysts who believe that proliferation can contribute to the security of current nuclear powers, instead of reducing it, will see additional reasons for opposing disarmament as non-proliferation policy.²⁰

Second, although it might initially appear otherwise, the case presented here against disarmament does not translate directly into support for nuclear proliferation. This argument against disarmament hinges on the ability of previously nuclear states to rearm. Non-nuclear states that cannot build nuclear weapons ‘quickly’ – within the timespan of a reasonably long conventional war – are in a quite different situation.²¹ These states still have the option of ensuring that a crisis or conventional war between them cannot escalate to a nuclear war. As a result, they can choose, via the non-proliferation regime, to preserve a truly non-nuclear world that is unavailable to nuclear states, even if these latter states are willing to disarm. That non-nuclear states might prefer this option is not inconsistent with the broad argument against disarmament by major nuclear powers, precisely because the non-nuclear states have this additional option.²²

The Future Role of Nuclear Weapons

Although these complicated considerations leave room for disagreement, the case for complete disarmament is not compelling. The most common rationale for disarmament appears to be faulty – instead of reducing the probability of deliberate nuclear war, disarmament would be more likely to increase it. Other arguments for disarmament are sound, but their benefits are not large enough to outweigh the costs. Although disarmament would eliminate the danger of accidental and unauthorised use, the vast majority of these reductions could be achieved by measures short of disarmament. In addition, if nuclear disarmament broke down, these dangers would be greater than they are today. Disarmament would probably decrease the likelihood of proliferation by compelling the major powers to use force to prevent it, but the dangers if proliferation did occur would be greater. Moreover, because disarmament is not politically feasible for the foreseeable future, it cannot contribute in a timely fashion to the proliferation challenges that are now most pressing.

Assuming the nuclear powers do not pursue disarmament, there is still plenty of room for large, worthwhile changes in US nuclear forces. Studies that have focused attention on disarmament have also made a variety of useful recommendations for near-term policy, many of which would significantly reduce the probability of nuclear accidents and reduce the danger that problems in the Russian command-and-control system could result in unauthorised actions or theft of nuclear weapons. These recommendations include revising key elements of US nuclear doctrine, especially plans for targeting opposing nuclear forces and for the first use of nuclear weapons; reducing the alert levels of US and Russian nuclear forces; cutting the size of these forces well below the levels required by the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) II and the lower levels recently agreed to in principle at the March 1997 Helsinki summit; and eventually arms-control agreements that include all of the nuclear powers.²³ None of these recommendations is weakened by the strong case against disarmament. To be sure, it is also true that removing disarmament as a goal eliminates the most obvious rationale for pressing states to maintain extremely low levels of nuclear forces.

Although these recommendations are radical by Cold War standards, some disarmament proponents believe that the long-term danger posed by nuclear weapons makes them inadequate. They therefore call on critics to offer a more ambitious vision. The problem is that absolute long-term safety from the use of nuclear weapons lies in a permanent revolution in international relations, not in disarmament. Since disarmament will not bring about or preserve excellent relations, let alone create such a complete transformation of international relations, hopes that disarmament will provide a guarantee against nuclear war are misplaced. Thus any more ambitious plan for reducing the danger posed by deployed nuclear weapons must focus on transforming international politics – a much more difficult task than designing stable disarmament regimes.

Assuming that relations among the nuclear powers continue to improve, for whatever reason, then the role of their nuclear weapons should also continue to change. Nuclear weapons should move further into the background of their relationships and interactions. While not forgetting that the weapons exist, states would rarely – if ever – need to focus on others' nuclear arsenals. In such a world, nuclear forces would be understood still less than they are today in terms of their deterrent value, since there would be nothing on even the distant horizon to deter, and primarily in terms of insurance against an unforeseeable deterioration of relations. By eliminating the security dilemma, nuclear forces would cushion the nuclear powers from any surprises that might disturb this harmony. At this point, political relations might be good enough to make disarmament politically feasible. Nuclear states might then decide to disarm as part of their non-proliferation policy. Or, if non-proliferation is then a less pressing problem, they might decide that retaining modest arsenals was prudent.

If a still more radical transformation occurs, making even deteriorating political relations unthinkable, then increasingly states would be pushed to

conclude that nuclear disarmament had become their best option. However, this would not be because disposing of nuclear weapons would reduce the probability of nuclear war, since – in this new world – states would be confident that they would never enter into a nuclear war. Instead, nuclear weapons would have lost any purpose and states would disarm only to save money.

The bottom line is that arms control and nuclear disarmament are fundamentally different enterprises. Controlling numbers and types of nuclear forces, and their operations, can reduce the probability of nuclear war without relying first on dramatic political change. In contrast, radical and lasting political change is required before nuclear disarmament is desirable. If this transformation is ever achieved, disarmament will have been converted into a ‘luxury’ problem – eliminating nuclear weapons would make little difference, except possibly for the coercive leverage it would provide against proliferation. Excluding such a radical transformation, well-designed and well-managed nuclear arsenals will continue to contribute to avoiding nuclear war. It is consequently important that the current enthusiasm for nuclear disarmament does not distract attention from a variety of more immediate nuclear-policy initiatives – including revising US nuclear doctrine, agreements that further reduce force size and changes in alert posture – that appear promising.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Steve Fetter, David Glaser, Michael Glaser, Michael May and Dean Wilkening for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Notes

¹ On the nuclear disarmament debate, see, for example, Philip Noel-Baker, *The Arms Race: A Programme for World Disarmament* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1958); J. David Singer, ‘Part III: Disarmament: Modifying the Environment’, in Singer, *Deterrence, Arms Control and Disarmament* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 1962); and Richard Barnett and Richard A. Falk (eds), *Security in Disarmament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965).

² Important early post-Cold War studies include Regina C. Karp, *Security Without Nuclear Weapons? Different Perspectives on*

Non-Nuclear Security (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Joseph Rotblat, Jack Steinburger and Bhalchandra Udgaonkar (eds), *A Nuclear-Weapon-Free World: Desirable? Feasible?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); and Barry M. Blechman and Cathleen S. Fisher, ‘Phase Out the Bomb’, *Foreign Policy*, no. 97, Winter 1994–95, pp. 79–95.

³ ‘An American Legacy: Building a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World’, *The Final Report of the Steering Committee Project on Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Washington DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, March 1997), p. viii. See also ‘An Evolving US Nuclear Posture’, *The Second Report of the Steering Committee Project on Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Washington DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, December 1995); *Report of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons* (Canberra: Australian Department of Foreign

Affairs and Trade, August 1996); General Andrew J. Goodpaster and General Lee Butler, 'Joint Statement on Reduction of Nuclear Weapons: Declining Utility, Continuing Risks', 4 December 1996, available at <http://www.stimson.org>; and 'Statement on Nuclear Weapons by International Generals and Admirals', 5 December 1996, *ibid.* See also the range of views in the *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3, Summer 1997. For a critique of the Canberra Report, see Lawrence Freedman, 'Nuclear Weapons: From Marginalisation to Elimination?', *Survival*, vol. 39, no. 1, Spring 1997, pp. 184–89.

⁴ 'An American Legacy', p. viii.

⁵ The key counter-argument holds that the major powers would enjoy better political relations under disarmament and that any reduction in deterrence would be more than offset by improved relations, making conventional war less likely. As argued below, however, relations are likely to be worse in the disarmed world.

⁶ In addition, the potential of nuclear weapons to help deter conventional war is likely to be sufficient to convince some states that nuclear disarmament is undesirable, at least as long as they have doubts about the adequacy of their conventional forces for dealing with major conflicts and political relations are not sufficiently good to preclude the possibility of conventional war. For an expression of this view in the context of the current debate, see Gennadi K. Khromov, Letter to the Editor, *Survival*, vol. 39, no. 1, Spring 1997, p. 206. Moreover, opponents of disarmament have argued that the US needs nuclear weapons to deter regional conflicts. See, for example, Richard Haass, 'It's Dangerous to Disarm', *New York Times*, 11 December 1996. I do not focus on this argument because if disarmament is otherwise a good idea, then the reduction in the US ability to deter

regional wars is likely to be acceptable. Given the magnitude of US conventional advantages, the key issue is likely to be the extent to which deterring chemical and biological attacks by regional adversaries requires nuclear weapons. For a range of views on this question, see Victor A. Utgoff, *Nuclear Weapons and the Deterrence of Biological and Chemical Warfare*, Occasional Paper 36 (Washington DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, October 1997); George Bunn, 'Expanding Nuclear Options: Is the US Negating its Non-Use Pledges?', *Arms Control Today*, vol. 26, no. 4, May–June 1996; David Gompert, Kenneth Watman and Dean Wilkening, 'Nuclear First Use Revisited', *Survival*, vol. 37, no. 3, Autumn 1995, pp. 27–44; and Sir Michael Quinlan, Letter to the Editor, *Survival*, vol. 37, no. 4, Winter 1995–96, pp. 189–91.

⁷ For related arguments in the context of the Cold War, see Charles L. Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), Chapter 6.

⁸ For an early analysis of the military requirements of disarmament, see Thomas C. Schelling, *The Stability of Total Disarmament*, Study Memorandum Number 1 (Washington DC: Institute for Defense Analysis, October 1961); and Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 248–59. Also see Jonathan Schell, *The Abolition* (New York: Avon Books, 1984); and Michael J. Mazarr, 'Virtual Nuclear Arsenals', *Survival*, vol. 37, no. 3, Autumn 1995, pp. 7–26.

⁹ For more on why disarmament will be difficult to sustain, see Kenneth Waltz, 'Thoughts About Virtual Arsenals', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3, Summer 1997, pp. 153–61.

¹⁰ There was, however, a major debate over these issues during the 1970s and 1980s. For arguments that relative force size matters see, for example, Paul Nitze,

'Deterring Our Deterrent', *Foreign Policy*, no. 25, Winter 1976–77, pp. 195–210; and US Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, *Annual Report, FY 1982* (Washington DC: GPO, 1981); examples of the opposing view include Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy*, Chapter 2.

¹¹ On the security dilemma, see Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, January 1978, pp. 167–214.

¹² See, for example, Desmond Ball, 'US Strategic Forces: How Would They Be Used?', *International Security*, vol. 7, no. 1, Winter 1982–83, pp. 31–60; and Desmond Ball and Robert Toth, 'Revising the SIOP: Taking War-Fighting to Dangerous Extremes', *International Security*, vol. 14, no. 2, Spring 1990, pp. 65–92.

¹³ On the relationship between time pressures and accidents, see Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp. 227–32.

¹⁴ The improved political relations that have existed since 1991 are not required to support fundamental changes in US nuclear strategy – the case for major changes was strong during the Cold War. See Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*; and Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy*, Chapter 7.

¹⁵ Bruce Blair, *Global Zero Alert for Nuclear Forces* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1996), pp. 78–107; and Stansfield Turner, *Caging the Nuclear Genie: An American Challenge to Global Security* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

¹⁶ See the Committee on International Security and Arms Control, *The Future of US Nuclear Weapons Policy* (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1997), pp. 27–28.

¹⁷ Proposing very deep cuts are the Committee on International Security and Arms Control, *The Future of US*

Nuclear Weapons; and Ivo H. Daalder, 'What Vision for the Nuclear Future?', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, Spring 1995.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁹ On the time required to rebuild arsenals and monitoring regimes more generally, see Steve Fetter, 'Verifying Nuclear Disarmament', Occasional Paper No. 29 (Washington DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, October 1996).

²⁰ Reviewing this debate is Peter R. Lavoy, 'The Strategic Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation', *Security Studies*, vol. 4, no. 4, Summer 1995, pp. 695–753. Recent additions include Jordan Seng, 'Command and Control Advantages of Minor Nuclear States', *Security Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, Summer 1997, pp. 50–92; and David J. Karl, 'Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers', *International Security*, vol. 21, no. 3, Winter 1996–97, pp. 87–119.

²¹ An interesting aspect of this argument is that, in terms of strategic interaction, whether a state should be considered a nuclear state depends largely on how quickly it can build nuclear weapons, not on whether it has deployed nuclear weapons or even built their components.

²² This brief discussion has looked only at the argument that parallels the argument against disarmament – which compares the security of adversaries with and without deployed nuclear weapons – and is not intended as a full analysis of a state's decision whether or not to acquire nuclear weapons. States may often focus on different comparisons, including those that arise when other states have already deployed nuclear weapons or when significant adversaries enjoy conventional superiority, some of which will favour proliferation. In these analyses, however, the arguments that parallel those against disarmament will play little, if any, role. On why states decide to acquire nuclear weapons, see

Scott D. Sagan, 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb', *International Security*, vol. 21, no. 3, Winter 1996–97, pp. 54–86.

²³ In addition to the studies cited in footnote 3, see also the Committee on

International Security and Arms Control, *The Future of US Nuclear Weapons Policy*, which also addresses the question of disarmament, but is less decided; and Blair, *Global Zero Alert for Nuclear Forces*.