

Nonproliferation and Disarmament Attitudes and Perspectives: Troubling Divergences

by

Christopher A. Ford

Remarks at the IGCC Public Policy & Nuclear Threats 2009 Summer Training Workshop
University of California, San Diego (July 29, 2009)

[As prepared for delivery]

I would like to start by thanking the organizers at IGCC for giving me the chance to participate in this conference. I'm sorry not to have been able to attend more of your events over the last couple of days: it looks like a terrific program.

By this point, you probably don't need me to tell you about the tremendous challenges facing the nonproliferation regime. Nor do you need me to tell you about how those challenges – including the unapologetic lawbreaking of North Korea, the more disingenuous (but no less dangerous) approach being taken by Iran, and the looming specter of a world full of states possessing an easy nuclear “option” through allegedly lawful technology proliferation – remain, as yet, almost shockingly unaddressed.

Judging from the program schedule, you have already heard speakers address a range of issues already, from matters of technology to questions of nuclear weapons policy, and from the architecture of international regimes to case studies of verification work. For my part, I thought it might be useful to offer you a survey of the attitudes and perceptions of key players in the regime – as I understand them, at least – towards the challenges of nonproliferation and disarmament that face the international community today. Such a survey, perhaps, will shed some light upon why we have not been able to come farther together in addressing some of the challenges faced by the nonproliferation

regime, and will help highlight some of the obstacles we'll need to overcome in the future. I'd be happy to talk about issues of where the regime can or should go in the years ahead, but I'll leave that for the question and answer period after my initial remarks. For now, therefore, let's just take a quick survey of attitudes and approaches. Unfortunately, these attitudes and approaches seem to diverge considerably on some pivotal issues.

United States

Let's begin with the United States. Successive U.S. administrations have strongly and consistently supported nonproliferation, though they have differed in how high a priority to assign the issue relative to other pressing concerns. Washington helped convince a number of countries to forgo nuclear weapons development and has been at the forefront of efforts to improve the nonproliferation regime. As for disarmament, the United States has claimed to support the idea of nuclear disarmament for as long as nuclear weapons have existed – beginning with Washington's quite dramatic proposals for nuclear disarmament and the international control of nuclear energy outlined in the Acheson-Lilienthal Report in 1946 and so famously proposed to the new United Nations as the Baruch Plan. Those plans came to naught, of course, and America's disarmament ardor cooled with the advent of increasing geopolitical rivalry with the Soviet Union.

With the end of the Cold War, however, the long-declared U.S. support for disarmament became more concrete with a dramatic and ongoing program of reductions in delivery systems and deployed strategic warheads, and accelerated programs for warhead dismantlement. Today, the United States is alone among NPT nuclear weapons states – and perhaps alone among all nuclear weapons possessors in the world – in *not* modernizing its delivery systems. The only *potential* new delivery system even being discussed is the so-called “next-generation bomber,” but it is presently on “hold” pending the outcome of strategic talks with Russia, and there is debate about whether this new aircraft should be “dual-use” (that is, nuclear-capable) at all.

Whether further U.S. reductions can or will ultimately lead to abolition is unknown. One way or the other, however, the United States seems to be on a path of nuclear de-emphasis, one in which Cold War–style deterrence plays an ever smaller role. Under this new approach – apart simply from shrinkage – legacy force postures are not being adapted to newer threats. Meanwhile, long-term reliability questions persist with regard to the United States’ aging nuclear warheads. The Obama Administration opposes nuclear testing but has abandoned Bush-era efforts to develop a no-testing-required “reliable replacement warhead.” Even where the new administration has clearly understood the need to address warhead reliability issues, such as with a refurbishment program for the B-61 bomb, the Democrat-controlled Congress has so far balked. (The U.S. trade press is also full of hand-wringing about the alleged decay of the U.S. industrial base in solid-propellant boosters for long-range ballistic missiles.) To be sure, there seems to be no immediate likelihood of the United States abandoning nuclear arms. Nonetheless, despite modernization by other possessors and the international community’s decidedly mixed modern track record in preventing nuclear weapons proliferation, the United States seems to be advancing, almost alone, into a *de facto* post-nuclear era.

Russia

What a contrast this makes with contemporary Russian nuclear policy! Where the United States seems less and less interested in its own nuclear capabilities, Russia seems to have become increasingly *committed* to nuclear weaponry. Russian strategic doctrine remains fixated on nuclear war-fighting scenarios and entertains nightmares of encirclement by more capable conventional forces. Moscow anticipates the possibility of using nuclear weapons in response to the use of WMD against Russia, or even in response to large-scale aggression using conventional weapons. Russia has, in the words of its own officials, “lower[ed] the threshold for using nuclear weapons” and “extend[ed] the nuclear deterrent to smaller conflicts.”

Russia is also modernizing its strategic delivery systems, deploying new mobile missiles, working on a new generation of ballistic missile submarine with a new missile

and warhead, and developing an entirely new “hypersonic glide vehicle” launched from a ballistic missile. Nor has modernization work stopped with delivery systems: Moscow is developing new types of nuclear weapons, apparently in part by using secret low yield nuclear explosive tests notwithstanding Russia’s claimed testing moratorium. Unlike Washington, therefore, Moscow is not content with a nuclear posture designed for Cold War–era threats and with forces merely maintained at progressively decreasing numbers. Rather, Russia is busily attempting to tailor its forces to the perceived needs of the 21st-century security environment.

Russia also seems somewhat ambivalent about the prospect of others acquiring such capabilities. Moscow does not seem to feel that the country’s interests are threatened by proliferation in the way that the United States obviously does, and Russia’s record in the post–Cold War era is accordingly mixed. If anything, Moscow may see some degree of proliferation as strategically advantageous. Viewed through the Cold War–tinted, zero-sum lens with which modern Russian leaders still approach geopolitics, limited proliferation (e.g., in Iran) may serve Russia’s interest by constraining U.S. options and complicating Washington’s strategy in the Middle East. The Kremlin may believe that what constrains U.S. hyperpower is good for Moscow.

This may help explain Moscow’s ambivalent approach to nonproliferation. In 1995, for instance, Russia and Iran agreed to a nuclear cooperation deal that led to the current nuclear reactor project at Bushehr. This arrangement reportedly included a short-lived side protocol for the construction of a gas centrifuge uranium enrichment plant. Some years later, Russia agreed to provide surface-to-air missiles with which Iran was expected to defend its nuclear sites in the event, for instance, of a U.S. or Israeli attack born of frustration at the international community’s inability or refusal to reign in Iran’s nuclear weapons program by less dramatic means. Russian opposition to tougher UN sanctions against Iran and North Korea has also been instrumental in forestalling more vigorous response to both countries’ continued defiance of international law.

China

China also appears to assign increasing value to nuclear weapons and to approach nuclear weapons proliferation with ambivalence. China is today the sole country among the five NPT nuclear weapons states to be actually increasing the size of its nuclear arsenal. It is also one of four NPT nuclear weapons states that is modernizing its strategic nuclear delivery systems. This build-up is usually described as “slow,” but according to Pentagon estimates China has actually increased the size of its arsenal by about 25 percent since 2005 alone. Beijing’s qualitative and quantitative improvements include new road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles and a new submarine that will fire equally new missiles.

On the whole, China’s nuclear strategy is quite opaque. Beijing is sometimes said to be seeking “minimum deterrence.” No one outside of Beijing, however, seems to know exactly what minimum deterrence means, except that such a minimum apparently requires having more nuclear weapons, along with more capable delivery systems in greater numbers, than ever before. Chinese officials have also ruled out arms control discussions until the United States and Russia have come down to Beijing’s level – or perhaps China has built up to theirs. From Beijing’s perspective, it would appear, disarmament advocacy is more about facilitating China’s rise to first-tier geopolitical stature as it is about actually eliminating nuclear weaponry.

For years China had nothing but contempt for nonproliferation obligations, which Mao Zedong scorned. In fact, Mao *defended* proliferation as a useful tool for thwarting dominant foreign powers. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, China long played a role in encouraging the proliferation of nuclear weapons (e.g., to Pakistan), fissile material (e.g., to Iran), and ballistic missile technology (e.g., to Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea). Although China has more recently been a participant in the six-party talks on North Korea, Beijing has consistently opposed tougher sanctions against both North Korea and Iran. Even more so than Russia’s, China’s commitment to nonproliferation thus seems somewhat ambivalent. Beijing, like Moscow, may still regard at least some

proliferation as a useful check upon the ambitions of its strategic rivals. At the very least, it is hard to describe Beijing as being a strong supporter of nonproliferation.

France

France shares the commitment all NPT nuclear weapons states have made to the eventual goal of disarmament, but Paris seems less interested – even rhetorically – than the British or the Americans in actualizing it. To be sure, President Nicholas Sarkozy has recently revealed additional French nuclear weapons reductions and called for a ban on the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons, while even before his tenure French officials had begun somewhat to raise their diplomatic profile on disarmament issues in the wake of U.S. and British initiatives beginning in 2007. Nevertheless, it is not clear what this means, and the less charitable observer might still think Paris is simply playing an awkward and grumpy game of public diplomacy “catch up,” now that the British and Americans at least *talk* about disarmament with such openness. (Interestingly, as far as I know, Paris has still carefully refrained actually from committing itself to nuclear disarmament *except* in the context of achieving the broader – and even *less* likely – goal set forth in the NPT’s Article VI of establishing a “treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict international control.”)

How central are nuclear forces to France’s modern self-image and perceived status and role in the world? On the one hand, the old French requirement for independent nuclear forces sufficient to permit a sort of strategic triangulation between the two nuclear superpowers would seem to have far less relevance in today’s world than during the Cold War. On the other hand, France seems to have invested a peculiarly Gallic amount of political energy in the *symbolism* of nuclear weapons possession for France’s own international self-image and sense of importance. Sarkozy continues to emphasize the importance to France of the *force de frappe*, and Paris is indeed presently introducing a new generation of ballistic missile submarine. French officials also apparently join their colleagues in *all* the other NPT nuclear weapons states in envisioning at least the *possibility* of nuclear weapons use in response not merely to an attack using nuclear weapons but also to attack using other forms of WMD.

As for nonproliferation, France is today a strong supporter, but it has not always been so. President Charles DeGaulle and other French leaders saw proliferation – such as, most obviously, to *France* – as a tool to empower smaller states confronted with the stark choices presented by Cold War-era great power politics. As it began its own nuclear weapons program, France also agreed to build the Israelis a reactor at the location now known as Dimona. This is said to have become Israel’s main plutonium-production reactor for its nuclear weapons program, and this seems to have been no coincidence. It is said that there were explicit weapons-related understandings agreed between the French and Israeli governments as early as 1957.

United Kingdom

The British commitment to nonproliferation *seems* quite strong. I class them with the United States in this regard, and myself had the distinct pleasure of working closely with British colleagues in dismantling Libya’s WMD program in 2004. With regard to disarmament, London is also the nuclear-armed capital that appears the most serious about “zero.” Beginning in 2007 with a series of speeches in which senior officials voiced strong support for nuclear weapons abolition and announced initiatives aimed at helping devise technical and procedural answers to some of the challenges that would be associated with verifying weapons elimination, the British government has been relatively forward-leaning on disarmament.

That said, of course, Britain does not seem to envision elimination anytime soon. It is one of the (vast majority of) weapons possessors to be modernizing its delivery systems, having made the politically traumatic decision in late 2006 to build a successor to its Trident ballistic missile submarines. It must also be said that one of the reasons the UK probably feels so free to discuss “zero” is the fact that it relies heavily upon its alliance relationship with the United States for strategic security, including nuclear deterrence. As a Chinese colleague once put it to me, “[o]f course *they* [the British] can talk about disarmament! They have *you* to protect them. Who do *we* have?” It was an interesting point.

There are also those who suspect that Britain's recent re-embrace of disarmament had a strong component of domestic political theater to it. The Trident decision in December 2006 cost the Labour Party dearly in terms of political support in the House of Commons. In the face of mass defections on the political left, Tony Blair's Labour government only won the Trident vote with strong support from the Conservative Party – and spent some time thereafter trying to get these so-called “Old Labour” legislators back on board. It is probably no coincidence that the Labour Government began stepping up disarmament-related public diplomacy outreach in just a few months after that vote, with two former Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) members and unilateral nuclear disarmament supporters (Margaret Beckett and Des Browne) leading the charge to restore the disarmament credentials of the Blair-cum-Brown government.

I think the United Kingdom's approach to disarmament is likely, in the end, to depend in large part upon U.S. policy decisions. If the Anglo-American alliance remains strong and credible, it might be possible for London to take “zero” quite seriously indeed, in part by resting on the strength of U.S. “extended [nuclear] deterrence.” An *American* commitment to disarmament might greatly complicate things for London, however. Unless British officials have concluded that nuclear deterrence is no longer of *any* use, Washington's embrace of nuclear weapons abolition could make it *harder* for Britain to contemplate zero because the UK would lose its longstanding position under the U.S. “nuclear umbrella.” At the same time, U.S. disarmament would also make it more difficult than ever for Britain to maintain its independent force. (At present, British submarines fire American-made Trident missiles with warheads that are said to be intriguingly close cousins – or perhaps even siblings – of U.S. models.)

Japan

Japan has a good record of support for nonproliferation, and in fact has sometimes taken a harder line against North Korea in the Six-Party Talks than has the occasionally wobbly, diplomatic “success”-seeking United States. At the same time, Japan has been a tireless advocate of global nuclear disarmament. Tokyo nonetheless has a complex

relationship with nuclear weapons. Japan is the iconic “almost” nuclear weapons power in the world today. It possesses sophisticated nuclear technology, produces considerable quantities of fissile material – not all of which can always be accounted for – and has a well-developed space launch capability (a.k.a. expertise with intercontinental ballistic missile delivery). Much as President Kennedy once quipped about the difference between an Atlas ballistic missile and the Atlas booster of the Gemini program, all that stands in the way of Japan becoming a nuclear weapons power is “attitude.”

Given the acuteness of Japanese concerns over North Korea and a rising China, U.S. diplomats worry lest Tokyo conclude that national security requires an independent nuclear deterrent. After North Korea’s October 2006 nuclear test, for instance, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice rushed to Tokyo to reassure Japan of the U.S. commitment to its defense; then-Foreign Minister Taro Aso – who himself, before taking office, had publicly advocated that Japan debate the nuclear weapons option – duly responded that Tokyo still had no plans to develop nuclear weapons. Clearly, Japan *already* enjoys a sort of “proto-deterrence” grounded in nuclear weapons *potential*, which it uses both to elicit stronger security guarantees from Washington and as an implicit check on Chinese provocations.

All in all, therefore, Tokyo has a profound ambivalence about nuclear weaponry. For pretty obvious reasons, Japan has a powerful domestic political commitment to disarmament and distaste for reliance on nuclear weapons, but it quite self-consciously relies on nuclear weaponry – in the form of the nuclear-backed U.S. alliance guarantee – for security in an increasingly nuclear-armed neighborhood, even as Tokyo continues to decline to exercise the domestic nuclear weapons option clearly technically available to it. Japan is simultaneously horrified by and awkwardly dependent on nuclear weapons. It is also, perhaps, just a little bit tempted – especially if questions develop about the solidity of U.S. alliance guarantees.

South Korea

Seoul has been a reliable supporter of strong nonproliferation policies vis-à-vis

other countries. It also has much ambivalence about nuclear weapons where its own security is concerned. Like Japan, South Korea is a non-nuclear weapons state that has sophisticated nuclear capabilities and faces acute security challenges that it presently meets in large part through a robust military relationship with the United States. Seoul thus also finds itself in a similarly ambivalent position. In even more problematic contrast to Japan, however, there is apparently a notable degree of domestic political *support* for nuclear weaponry in South Korea. Indeed Seoul at one time in the past did possess a clandestine weapons program, and its scientists have occasionally dabbled in impermissible laboratory experiments with uranium enrichment and plutonium separation. Today, Seoul openly longs for enrichment or reprocessing capabilities for its nuclear power industry, and has been researching a form of plutonium reprocessing – “pyroprocessing,” which officials sometimes try to pretend isn’t *really* plutonium reprocessing – for years. Combined with the space launch capability South Korea is presently developing, which could form the basis of a long-range missile program, one might suspect Seoul to be positioning itself as yet another nuclear-weapons-state-in-waiting.

Pakistan

From the mid-1980s, Pakistan possessed a “recessed” nuclear deterrent: the ability to produce weapons on short notice, even if actual weaponization was held in abeyance. This status ended after India’s 1998 nuclear test, however, when Pakistan conducted a test of its own. Pakistan’s nuclear doctrine seems focused on deterring both nuclear weapons use and conventional military attack by Islamabad’s perceived regional arch-rival, India. Owing to concerns over India’s conventional military power, Pakistan rejects a “no-first-use” policy. It certainly evinces no interest in nuclear disarmament.

Unfortunately, perhaps the best thing that can be said about Pakistan’s nonproliferation record is that Islamabad has not been reported *recently* to have been a significant proliferation problem. Pakistan was the origin of the notorious proliferation smuggling ring run by nuclear weapons scientist A.Q. Khan, which provided uranium enrichment technology to Iran, Libya, North Korea, and perhaps others from the mid-

1980s until just a few years ago. This network even provided Chinese-origin weapons designs to Libya and – in the form of easily-distributable electronic copies subsequently discovered on computers in Dubai and Switzerland – possibly to other recipients. Wracked by political instability and now facing a formidable Islamist insurgency, Pakistan is the poster child for fears about a country losing control of nuclear technology or weapons.

India

If Japan is the iconic state within the NPT that could easily develop nuclear weaponry but still chooses not to, India is the emblematic state *outside* the NPT that *exercised* the option. It is also a paradigmatic case of the abuse of nuclear cooperation provided for purposes unrelated to setting off nuclear explosions. Having first tested a nuclear device in 1974, India announced additional tests in 1998. India professes a “no-first-use policy” but apparently interprets this broadly to include retaliation for *non*-nuclear WMD attacks. The initial decision in 1964 to authorize nuclear weapons work was reportedly “motivated primarily by concern about China,” which had invaded India just two years before and which had tested a nuclear weapon that same year. China’s power still looms large in Indian strategic thinking, and Sino-Indian rivalry plays into many disarmament-related issues. With at least half an eye turned to the rising power of China and some attention still focused upon its old regional rival Pakistan, India evinces little interest in disarmament despite its longstanding rhetoric on the subject. Indeed, just a couple of days ago I saw media reports of India having begun sea trials for the first vessel in a new class of nuclear-powered submarine armed with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles – a vessel built, interestingly enough, with extensive Russian cooperation, and which is India’s first foray into the world of survivable, sea-based nuclear forces.

As for nonproliferation, New Delhi never signed the NPT, because it clearly wished to go its own way in developing nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, as a result of the 2005 U.S.-India Civilian Nuclear Cooperation Initiative, India is increasingly tied to the broader nonproliferation regime. India agreed to divide its military nuclear programs from the civilian power industry and to subject the latter to safeguards, including the

Additional Protocol. This partial accommodation between India and the broader nonproliferation regime has been controversial – though in different ways. International critics have attacked it for allegedly diluting nonproliferation principles, while at home the Indian government faced a firestorm of criticism for allegedly becoming the patsy of an assertive U.S. nonproliferation policy. All in all, India’s nonproliferation status is debated, and certainly remains something of a work in progress.

The Rest of the World

Before I wrap up these remarks and we open the floor up for discussion, let me quickly say a word about every other country in the world. Don’t worry, however: I’ll do it with a very broad brush. Beyond the key players I’ve already discussed, perspectives on both nonproliferation and disarmament vary. To be sure, with the exception of North Korea, no one fails to *claim* fidelity to the cause of both nonproliferation *and* disarmament. But the devil is in the details.

Some, including most non-nuclear European states, seem quite genuinely attached to both, generally lending diplomatic support to nonproliferation policies *and* advocating nuclear disarmament by the weapons possessors. With few exceptions, however – and here Canada and Australia come to mind – few are willing to prioritize nonproliferation to such an extent that it would entail significant diplomatic, much less economic, costs. And with regard to disarmament, a number of countries in Europe (and some elsewhere) propound disarmament even as they meet their own perceived security needs in part through reliance upon U.S. “extended” nuclear deterrence. In my previous job, I came across situations in which foreign ministry officials publicly berated the United States for not phasing out its last few nuclear weapons in Europe even while their defense ministry colleagues passionately urged us, in private, to do no such thing. (European political principles are apparently too subtle and sophisticated for an American like me to understand.)

Finally, for its part, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) tends increasingly to take ostensibly pro-disarmament positions *at the expense* of nonproliferation. Though

NAM governments have a very great range of opinions individually, as a bloc its official positions have tended more and more to be captured by radicalized activist members such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Iran. NAM governments seem genuinely committed to weapons state disarmament, but led by such activists the group has increasingly been suspicious of nonproliferation – seeing it as a conspiracy of nuclear “haves” to maintain their weapons monopoly while dragging their feet on disarmament. Few would put it so baldly, at least publicly, but NAM positions have been creeping toward a view that nuclear weapons proliferation is a sort of well-deserved and almost *welcome* come-uppance for the nuclear weapons states. With the exception of the activists, NAM governments probably do not actually *want* more proliferation. That said, however, they seem to *oppose* rigorous nonproliferation policies, at least unless and until the weapons states disarm. Sadly, the NAM today remains a major obstacle to responsible nonproliferation policy in international fora such as the IAEA Board of Governors and the NPT review process. For this reason, the Movement ironically also presents a major problem for the international community’s hopes of ever bringing about nuclear disarmament – a goal the NAM claims to cherish, almost above all else in such fora. (After all, if the nonproliferation regime cannot prevent new states from acquiring nuclear weapons, how can it expect existing possessors to disarm, or the world to *remain* at zero even if they did?)

Conclusion

This survey should give us plenty for us to chew on for now. I would be delighted to open up the floor for questions, feedback, and discussion – including your thoughts on where we all can and should go from here in light of the greatly divergent perspectives on nonproliferation and disarmament that I have outlined.

Thank you.