The Strategy of Non-proliferation: Maintaining the Credibility of an Incredible Pledge to Disarm

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Abstract

This article criticises the leadership of the new nuclear disarmament movement in the United States for not going far enough. Whether the US administration actually wants to achieve disarmament or not, implementing the current US nuclear policy agenda will not produce a world free of nuclear weapons. Rather, it will reinvigorate an ailing non-proliferation regime by adapting it to confront new nuclear threats. This conclusion is based on a two-part argument. Firstly, non-proliferation is a strategy much like the Cold War-era strategy of extended deterrence. Just as extended deterrence required the US to maintain the credibility of an *incredible* threat to attack, non-proliferation requires the US to maintain the credibility of an *incredible* pledge to disarm. Thus, re-establishing disarmament as a credible long-term goal of US nuclear policy will persuade other states in the short term to forgo nuclear weapons and cooperate in restricting access to fissile materials. Secondly, contrary to the common-sense interpretation of the relationship between non-proliferation and disarmament, it does not follow that a robust non-proliferation regime will lead to the elimination of nuclear weapons. In fact, experience suggests just the opposite: Non-proliferation does not lead to disarmament. In conclusion, whatever the Obama administration's aim, the current US nuclear policy will reduce the threat nuclear weapons pose to the US, while obviating the need for the US to disarm itself.

Keywords

deterrence, disarmament, non-proliferation, nuclear security strategy, nuclear weapons, nuclear zero

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student work in a journal open to new issues and innovative approaches to International Relations. It is open to students currently pursuing or who have recently completed a degree in International Relations or a related field. The winner is chosen on the basis of the essay's contribution to the advancement of the field, originality of the argument and scholarly presentation.

Since the 1950s, the policymakers who have shaped US foreign policy have consistently regarded nuclear disarmament as a laudable, but ultimately unrealistic, goal. As a result, when prominent architects of the Cold War nuclear order – led by George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn – proclaimed publically for the first time that they supported the goal of 'a world free of nuclear weapons', their announcement marked a turning point in the US debate about nuclear security.[1] In particular, their 2007 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed had a transformational effect, fundamentally reconfiguring the positions within the debate on US nuclear policy for the first time in more than half a century.[2]

Until the recent contribution from these statesmen, debates about nuclear security strategy reproduced predictable Cold War fault lines. On the one hand, disarmament idealists believed that we could all work together to overcome national rivalries and achieve the global good of complete nuclear disarmament. Disarmament idealism is epitomised by the grassroots activism of the anti-nuclear movement in the early 1980s. On the other hand, hard-headed realists insisted that parochial power politics would always trump idealistic aspirations, leaving nuclear deterrence as the only viable alternative. Henry Kissinger's academic work from the 1960s exemplifies this kind of deterrence-based nuclear realism, as did the political agenda he implemented under President Nixon.[3] Surprisingly, not even the dissolution of the Soviet Union revolutionised ideas about US nuclear security policy: facts were rapidly changing, but in the domain of ideas, interest in the topic of nuclear threats declined, debate stagnated and nuclear deterrence remained the foundation for US national security strategy.[4]

This stagnation in the mainstream debate ended with the argument the four Cold Warriors offered in their op-ed. Surprisingly, they endorsed the idealist pursuit of disarmament based on a hard-headed, realist rationale: since new nuclear threats can no longer be countered through nuclear deterrence, the only way for the US to protect itself from those threats is to limit access to nuclear materials through global programmes aimed at the (as of yet unobtainable) goal of abolishing nuclear weapons.

While it is tempting to interpret this fundamental reconfiguration of Cold War positions on nuclear security as heralding a new era in American foreign policy, in this article I reach the conclusion that, even in the long term, embracing this discursive shift will not eliminate the US nuclear arsenal. What it will do is reinvigorate an existing non-proliferation agenda by re-establishing the credibility of the US pledge to disarm. Thus, I argue that what at first

1. George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger and Sam Nunn, 'A World Free of Nuclear Weapons', *Wall Street Journal*, 5 January 2007.
2. J. Peter Scoblic, 'Disarmament Redux', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 64, no. 1 (2008): 34–9. As Scoblic observes, others including Paul Nitze have also expressed similar changes of heart, but none had such a significant impact on the shape of the debate.
3. Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969).
4. Janne E. Nolan, *An Elusive Consensus: Nuclear Weapons and American Security after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1999), 105.

glance appears to be an endorsement of disarmament is actually an implicit argument about the dynamics of non-proliferation. Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn argue that re-establishing nuclear disarmament as an explicit long-term goal of the US policy agenda will persuade other states in the short term to forgo nuclear weapons and cooperate in restricting access to fissile materials.[5] In more general terms, they are claiming that if states with nuclear weapons demonstrate a credible pledge to the goal of disarmament, the rate at which additional international actors build or acquire nuclear weapons will decrease.[6] I agree with this interpretation of non-proliferation, and I will demonstrate its basic mechanisms. However, I also argue that, whether Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn want to achieve disarmament or not, their initiative will not lead to a world free of nuclear weapons. Contrary to conventional wisdom, I argue that the practice of non-proliferation does not lead to disarmament. In fact, experience suggests just the opposite: the purpose of US non-proliferation policy is to obviate the need for the US to disarm itself.

This argument about the relationship of non-proliferation to disarmament is based on an observation about the similarity between the strategy of extended deterrence and the logic driving the current renaissance in disarmament – both of which Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn played instrumental roles in designing and implementing.[7] Specifically, just as the strategy of extended deterrence was designed to prevent an attack against Europe by preparing to fight and win an unwinnable nuclear war, the strategy advocated by Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn is designed to prevent other countries from obtaining nuclear weapons by preparing to achieve the (as of yet) unachievable goal of nuclear disarmament. In other words, just as extended deterrence required the US to maintain the credibility of an *incredible* threat to attack, non-proliferation requires the US to maintain the credibility of an *incredible* pledge to disarm.

The argument in this article proceeds in four sections. In the first section, I introduce the credibility thesis, which posits that increasing the credibility of the US commitment to disarm will convince other states to forgo nuclear weapons and cooperate in limiting access to fissile materials. I then demonstrate that the credibility thesis provides the foundation for current thinking about non-proliferation and disarmament in the US. In the second section, I take the logic of the credibility thesis a step further by establishing a parallel between the Cold War-era systems of extended deterrence and non-proliferation. The third section further unpacks the logic of the credibility thesis by analysing the role of belief in sustaining deterrence and non-proliferation. In the fourth section, I draw out implications for the politics of disarmament. If the parallel between extended deterrence and non-proliferation is correct, non-proliferation is not a step along the way to the elimination of nuclear weapons, but rather a strategy the US and the Soviet Union (now Russia) employ to reduce nuclear danger and retain the benefits of nuclear deterrence.

5. Although policies designed to prevent non-state terrorist groups from accessing nuclear materials are not coterminous with policies directed at state-based proliferation, Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn treat them as interrelated.
6. My interpretation of their claim is that a commitment by the nuclear weapon states (led by the US) to disarm is sufficient to halt nuclear proliferation. However, it is not a necessary condition. Thus, according to their logic, if the US commitment to disarm is high, proliferation will always be low. However, if the US commitment to disarm is low, the rate of proliferation may or may not increase because there could be other factors that would keep proliferation low.
7. Extended deterrence refers to the threat of military (and in particular nuclear) retaliation in the event of aggression against a third party.

The Credibility Thesis

A closer look at the logic on which the current renaissance in disarmament politics is predicated reveals that what at first glance appears to be an endorsement of disarmament is actually an implicit argument about the dynamics of non-proliferation. In this section, I show that the Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn initiative, together with the Obama administration's nuclear agenda, rest on the logic of what Christopher Ford refers to as 'the credibility thesis'. As its greatest critic, Ford does an excellent job of defining his target:

> [According to the credibility thesis] one of the reasons the world has not been able to rein in the proliferation of nuclear weaponry more effectively is that the five states authorized by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to possess nuclear weapons – the NPT 'nuclear weapons states,' or NWS – have not shown sufficient 'credibility' on the issue of nuclear disarmament. The treaty, this argument goes, is founded upon three pillars: nonproliferation, disarmament, and a commitment to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Because the NWS have not taken their disarmament obligations under the NPT seriously enough, it is said, other countries find our entreaties to implement nonproliferation policies shallow and unpersuasive, and, not surprisingly, have not been fully cooperative in addressing proliferation challenges such as those presented by Iran and North Korea. We are told that if only Washington … would finally show real nuclear disarmament credibility, the international community would be much more willing to work together to enforce the NPT's nonproliferation rules.[8]

Ford goes on to argue that the credibility thesis is fundamentally flawed and not substantiated by the historical record. I disagree with his analysis of the credibility thesis on the basis that non-proliferation functions much like extended deterrence, and therefore is no more or less flawed than the credibility thesis at the heart of deterrence theory.[9] However, I agree with both Ford's description of the credibility thesis and his identification of it as 'one of those unexamined suppositions from which numerous *other* lines of policy argumentation begin, and upon which their intellectual credibility rests'.[10]

For instance, Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn argue that re-establishing nuclear disarmament as an explicit long-term goal of the US policy agenda will persuade other states in the short term to forgo nuclear weapons and cooperate in restricting access to fissile materials. Whatever these statesmen actually think about the goal of disarmament, their position is entirely consistent with renewing the Cold War-era consensus on disarmament as expressed in Article VI of the Nonproliferation Treaty – a consensus that postponed disarmament indefinitely. As codified, Article VI is not an agreement to disarm, but rather a meta-level commitment 'to pursue negotiations in good faith'. In other words, the commitment is to the pursuit itself, not actual disarmament. Likewise, Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn do not endorse a step-by-step plan to reach the goal of disarmament; they endorse a meta-level commitment to the *vision* of nuclear

8. Christopher Ford, *Nuclear Disarmament, Nonproliferation and the Credibility Thesis* (Washington, DC: The Hudson Institute, September 2009), 2.
9. Although the credibility thesis can be tested empirically, I do not test it here. This article is an exercise in theory building in which I assume the validity of the credibility thesis and spin out its implications for current US disarmament politics.
10. Ford, *Nuclear Disarmament, Nonproliferation and the Credibility Thesis*, 2, emphasis in original.

disarmament. They clearly state that they cannot yet articulate how to reach the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world. Yet, they consider the vision of a nuclear-weapon-free world essential because it ensures that the steps they are advocating to limit access to nuclear materials will be 'perceived as fair and urgent'.[11]

This same logic of credibility is reflected in President Obama's nuclear security strategy. The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) provides a road map for taking concrete steps towards President Obama's vision of a world without nuclear weapons. In it, the argument implicit in the Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn advocacy of disarmament is made explicit. The 2010 NPR states that '[b]y demonstrating that we take seriously our NPT obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament, we strengthen our ability to mobilize broad international support for the measures needed to reinforce the non-proliferation regime and secure nuclear materials worldwide'.[12]

A great deal is riding on the belief at the heart of the credibility thesis that increasing the credibility of the nuclear weapon states on the issue of disarmament will motivate other countries to support US-backed non-proliferation policies. Therefore, unpacking its logic provides insights into the nature of nuclear weapons policymaking, as well as allowing us to more accurately assess the current US nuclear security agenda. As I will show in the following section, the validity of the credibility thesis as it applies to disarmament and non-proliferation functions much like the credible threat of nuclear attack at the heart of extended deterrence. Understanding how non-proliferation is more similar to, than different from, extended deterrence thus provides insights into the validity of the credibility thesis.

Extended Deterrence and the Strategy of Non-proliferation

Bringing together non-proliferation and deterrence under a unified logic may seem counter-intuitive. Although nuclear weapons are the subject of both deterrence and non-proliferation, the two practices are seldom studied together because analysts presume that they are different kinds of behaviour with different kinds of logic, and, therefore, ask different kinds of questions about them. Deterrence is a military strategy, of which extended deterrence is one variation.[13] It explains how and why states

11. Nuclear Security Project, 'About the Project', available at: http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/site/c.mjJXJbMMIoE/b.3534665/k.5828/About_the_Project_Index.htm (accessed 25 August 2010).
12. US Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, April 2010), 12.
13. Nuclear deterrence theory translates into multiple policy recommendations. Charles Glaser argues that there are three schools of thought: punitive retaliation, military denial and damage limitation. In contrast, I argue that there are two: punitive retaliation and war-fighting. Theorists such as Robert Jervis who argue for the maintenance of a minimum deterrent best exemplify punitive retaliation. Military denial and damage limitation are both what I would refer to as war-fighting positions. In other words, I elide Charles Glaser's distinction between the kind of military denial policy of someone like Keith Payne and Colin Gray and the damage limitation policy of someone like Harold Brown. The relevant distinction for the purposes of my argument lies in whether or not they consider the military balance of nuclear forces to be meaningful in the same sense as a conventional balance of forces, not in whether or not superiority or parity is required. Extended deterrence requires a war-fighting strategy because it is believed to be more difficult to maintain the credibility of a threat of nuclear retaliation in the event of aggression against a third party than it is in the event of aggression against one's own homeland. For more on the shape of the Cold War debate on nuclear deterrence, see Charles Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

should do some things with nuclear weapons and avoid doing others. There is no treaty or agreement that governs the requirements of deterrence. The logic of nuclear deterrence theory governs deterrence, and compliance is driven by rational self-interest. In contrast, analysts presume that non-proliferation is not a strategy. It is a collective bargain codified in legal agreements, which together form the *Non-proliferation Regime*. Compliance is presumed to require enforcement to ensure that states prioritise the collective good over their individual self-interest (narrowly construed). Thus, questions about military strategy drive conversations about deterrence, while questions of legal interpretation and compliance with international law form the core of conversations about non-proliferation.[14]

Rather than treating non-proliferation as a regime in which compliance is achieved through collective enforcement, I argue that non-proliferation is better understood as a strategy much like extended deterrence. In particular, the structure of the non-proliferation strategy implicit in the Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn disarmament initiative resembles the US nuclear security strategy of extended deterrence in the 1970s and 1980s – a strategy that these same statesmen were influential in implementing.

By the 1970s, both the US and the Soviet Union had developed secure second-strike capabilities, locking them into a relatively stable relationship of mutual deterrence. Although it was unlikely that either side would be able to escape the condition of mutual assured destruction through the continued development and deployment of nuclear weapons, both sides still grappled with the additional problem of extended deterrence. Reassuring allies that they were prepared not only to deter a direct attack, but to launch a nuclear attack in response to aggression against a third party, proved difficult. For the US, extended deterrence meant convincing its NATO allies that it was prepared to 'trade Chicago for Hamburg'[15] – a pledge that carried important implications for the extension of the US nuclear umbrella to allies in the Pacific as well – and led NATO to embrace nuclear first-use in its declaratory policy.[16]

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14. For literature reviews of deterrence, see Robert Jervis, 'Review: Deterrence Theory Revisited; Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice', *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (1979): 289–324; Richard A. Brody, 'Deterrence Strategies: An Annotated Bibliography', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 4, no. 4 (1960): 443–57. On proliferation, see Scott D. Sagan, 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb', *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 54–86; Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Jacques E.C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Erik Gartzke and Dong-Joon Jo, 'Determinants of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 1 (2007): 167–94; Maria Rost Rublee, *Why States Choose Nuclear Restraint* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009). Obviously, there are questions that bring together the topics of deterrence and (non-)proliferation. After all, the physical management of nuclear weapons and their constituent elements is the subject matter of both topics, so there is bound to be overlap. For instance, there are discussions about why states do or do not choose to produce nuclear weapons, in which a state's security interest in developing a nuclear deterrent is usually weighed against rival explanations of why a state did or did not decide to build a nuclear arsenal. However, these discussions do not disrupt the presumption that deterrence is a strategy while non-proliferation is a regime, but reproduce the same distinction.
15. Steven Pifer, Richard C. Bush III, Vanda Felbab-Brown, Martin S. Indyk, Michael E. O'Hanlon and Kenneth M. Pollack, 'U.S. Nuclear and Extended Deterrence: Considerations and Challenges', *Brookings Arms Control Series*, no. 3 (2010): 1.
16. Ibid.

The problem of extended deterrence was one of the factors fuelling the ongoing nuclear arms race in the 1970s and 1980s. In order to support the credibility of a nuclear first strike in response to an attack on an ally, both the US and the Soviet Union worked to maintain the appearance that they believed it was possible to fight and win a nuclear war. One of the ways they communicated this belief was through the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). These talks presumed that achieving a degree of military equality in the number and type of nuclear weapons each side possessed was still meaningful in an age of overkill. However, placing numerical limits on the different weapon systems each side could deploy sharpened public focus on quantitative comparisons of the US and Soviet arsenals, and created a fear that allowing the Soviets to have a numerical advantage – even if the US maintained a technological advantage – would harm diplomatic relations with US allies.[17] Focusing on the numerical balance of forces as a proxy for military power enabled policymakers to avoid talking about the underlying reality of nuclear war, and act as though victory in nuclear war would be as meaningful as victory in a conventional conflict.[18]

Obviously, advocates of the kind of war-fighting strategy that supports a policy of extended deterrence would contest the assertion that victory in nuclear war is an unobtainable ideal. The most extreme examples of this are Herman Kahn and his protégés. For instance, Keith Payne and Colin Gray argue against what they call 'the Armageddon syndrome'. The Armageddon syndrome equates nuclear war with an apocalyptic end of history. In contrast, they argue that, 'war at any level can be won or lost, and that the distinction between winning and losing would not be trivial'. Victory in nuclear war in their view would consist of 'the ability not merely to end a war, but to end it favorably', including minimising deaths through effective damage limitation.[19]

While the fact of nuclear destruction is indisputable,[20] whether or not nuclear victory is possible is, at least in part, a philosophical judgement about what is meant by victory. This article accepts the view of nuclear war as unwinnable shared by generations of

17. Steve Kull, 'Nuclear Nonsense', *Foreign Policy*, no. 58 (1985): 28–52. Kull argues that the substitution of a numerical balance of nuclear forces for a military strategic analysis became a matter of official US policy with the ratification of the SALT I Treaty in 1972. At the time of the negotiations, the negotiators of the treaty were primarily concerned with its strategic military implications, and thus, in the spirit of détente, were willing to accept numerical inferiority in some areas for superiority in others. However, when ratifying the treaty, the Senate added an amendment stating that the United States would negotiate a subsequent treaty with the Soviet Union that 'would not limit the United States to levels of intercontinental strategic forces inferior to the limits for the Soviet Union', 31.
18. Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 668; Colin S. Gray and Keith Payne, 'Victory Is Possible', *Foreign Policy* (Summer 1980): 14–27; Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Death in the Nuclear Age', *Commentary* 32, no. 3 (1961): 231; Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 82; Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 176; Steven Starr, 'Nuclear Darkness, Global Climate Change, and Nuclear Famine', available at: http://www.nucleardarkness.org (accessed 5 November 2010).
19. Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, 668; Gray and Payne, 'Victory Is Possible', 14–27.
20. Lynn Eden, *Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge and Nuclear Weapons Devastation* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2004); Starr, 'Nuclear Darkness'. However, as Lynn Eden points out in her book, *Whole World on Fire*, US nuclear war plans systematically underestimate the amount of destruction attendant to a nuclear war because they calculate damage from blast effects, but do not take mass fire into account. Estimates that take mass fire into account predict that even a small-scale nuclear war would have disastrous environmental effects leading to global mass starvation.

international relations scholars, including Hans Morgenthau, Bernard Brodie and Robert Jervis.[21] Morgenthau, for instance, concludes that a descent into barbarism cannot be meaningfully integrated into the concept of victory, and argues that to behave otherwise is to 'continue to think and act as though the possibility of nuclear death portended only a quantitative extension of the mass destruction of the past and not a qualitative transformation of the meaning of our existence'.[22]

Ultimately, what is most significant for the purpose of explicating the parallel between extended deterrence and non-proliferation is not whether or not nuclear victory is possible in theory, but that the dominant perception of it as something that had to be prevented led policymakers to construct a system for that purpose. The structural position of nuclear victory within the system of extended deterrence is that of an unobtainable ideal. Pursuing nuclear victory animates the system, yet the dynamics of that same system are structured such that it remains out of reach.

Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn (consciously or unconsciously) apply to the contemporary practice of non-proliferation the same logic that drove the Cold War arms race. Whatever the merit of and disagreements in the discussion on the real possibility of victory and disarmament, in both cases the policies they recommend result in the US acting *as if* it believed that an unobtainable ideal was within its grasp in order to influence the cost–benefit calculations of another state. A successful extended deterrent requires states to maintain the credibility of an *incredible* threat. States achieve this by behaving as if it were possible to win a nuclear war: they actually prepare to fight a nuclear war. Likewise, a successful non-proliferation regime requires states to maintain the credibility of an *incredible* pledge to disarm.[23] States achieve this by behaving as if it were possible to achieve complete nuclear disarmament: they actually engage in disarmament negotiations and agree to place limitations on their nuclear arsenals.

The Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn non-proliferation strategy is captured in the following slogan from the advocacy group they created to raise public awareness about nuclear threats, the Nuclear Security Project (NSP). In the slogan, they posit a self-reinforcing relationship between the actions they recommend to limit access to fissile materials, and the vision of complete nuclear disarmament: 'Without the bold vision, the actions will not be perceived as fair or urgent, without the action, the vision will not be perceived as realistic or possible.'[24] Ensuring that the actions are perceived as 'fair and urgent' is what will motivate states to cooperate with the actions, and the actions are what will bring

21. Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Death in the Nuclear Age', *Commentary* 32, no. 3 (1961): 231; Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 82; Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 176.
22. Morgenthau, 'Death in the Nuclear Age', 233.
23. Just as there is dispute over whether nuclear war is winnable, there is also dispute over whether or not disarmament is attainable. The argument I make in this article acknowledges the existence of arguments in favour of these ideals as obtainable. It is those positions against which this article is arguing. However, their status as achievable or unachievable cannot be proven one way or another. The position I take on disarmament is that it is achievable, but not as currently envisioned. As long as disarmament is described as a destination, it will remain unobtainable. In order for disarmament to be possible, it must be thought of as a strategy, or practice, much like deterrence, and requires a theory behind its implementation.
24. Nuclear Security Project, 'About the Project'; Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, and Nunn, 'A World Free of Nuclear Weapons', A15. This slogan also appears in their original 2007 op-ed.

credibility to the vision of disarmament. Transposing the logic of US nuclear security strategy into a statement with the same structure as the slogan above produces the following: '*Without the bold vision of victory in nuclear war, the arms race will not be perceived as rational or urgent, without the arms race, nuclear victory will not be perceived as realistic or possible*'. Victory in nuclear war functioned as a vision, or fantasy, that justified maintaining a military balance between the superpowers. Although everyone knew that nuclear war was unwinnable, the US based the credibility of its nuclear threat on maintaining the appearance that it was able to fight and win a nuclear war in defence of its European allies. Therefore, it was necessary to create the weapons and military infrastructure dictated by war-gaming scenarios in order to make the possibility of fighting and winning a nuclear war appear real.

The Other Presumed to Believe

At this point, a sceptic might argue that the parallel between non-proliferation and extended deterrence is invalid because advocates of nuclear disarmament, including Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, Nunn and President Obama, really do want to disarm. Unlike nuclear war, which is clearly objectionable, there is nothing inherently undesirable about the elimination of nuclear weapons. Thus, there is nothing 'incredible' about the US pledge to disarm. However, a closer look at what extended deterrence and non-proliferation have in common reveals that whether or not anyone actually believes in the credibility of the commitment to either fight and win a nuclear war or eliminate nuclear weapons is largely irrelevant. The presence of nuclear weapons sustains the logic of the current nuclear order and thus both nuclear war and disarmament remain infamously 'unthinkable' because achieving either would mean the end of the current system. The imagination of an end point or goal provides the motivation for the pattern of interactions, but from where we sit today, no one knows how to make that abstract end point a meaningful human reality because the rational incentives of the system are designed for the system to sustain itself.

Extended deterrence and non-proliferation are performative practices through which the US and the Soviet Union (and now Russia) compete for dominance by performing for both one another and their respective allies on the world stage.[25] Whether or not poli-

25. I focus on the US and the Soviet Union to the exclusion of the other nuclear weapon states because the system of non-proliferation was explicitly constructed in response to the demands of the US and the Soviet Union. Their centrality is reflected in the history of the NPT negotiations. The NPT was concluded in negotiations held by the independent, but UN-affiliated, Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC). Created in 1961 with the endorsement of the General Assembly, the ENDC's design reflected the desire to facilitate cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union. The 18 member states were intended to be a microcosm of the UN. Thus, the United States and the Soviet Union were each entitled to four allies, and the remaining eight states were not affiliated with either side. India, in particular, as a leader of the newly formed non-aligned movement, played an important part in setting the tone for the relationship of the unaffiliated members to the two superpowers, advocating that they think of themselves as a 'golden bridge' between the two adversaries. Their role, at least initially, was to reduce tensions in order to secure objectives related to disarmament. The United States and Soviet Union co-chaired the ENDC. As chairs, the two countries shared control over the agenda of the negotiations. First, each chair produced a draft treaty in consultation with its allies from the ENDC; then, they agreed upon the language of the drafts between themselves. Finally the drafts were submitted to the entire committee, including the unaffiliated states, for negotiation.

cymakers or citizens in the US, Soviet Union or any other country actually believe in the credibility of their deterrent threats or non-proliferation commitments is unimportant as long as they continue to act *as if* they believed. In the absence of a genuine belief, all that is necessary to sustain the pattern of behaviour is the perception that the belief is out there in the form of an audience. The interesting thing about this dynamic is that it is possible for policymakers to acknowledge that they themselves do not believe, as long as they can continue to point to an 'other' that does believe. Following Slavoj Žižek, I refer to this abstract entity as 'the other presumed to believe'.[26] This allows the policymakers to occupy the position of the cynic. Although they know very well that there is something irrational about the end state of disarmament as currently conceived of as 'zero nuclear weapons', they continue to engage in its pursuit. The goal itself is irrational, but the act of pursuing that goal is rational because there is an audience of assumed believers, and perceived costs associated with disabusing the audience of its beliefs.

Thus, while it is tempting to debate the parallel between non-proliferation and extended deterrence on the basis of what individuals *actually* intend or believe about disarmament, it is also futile because what the parallel reveals is that whether or not Obama, Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, Nunn or anyone else in the US believes in the desirability of disarmament is irrelevant. They may believe, or they may not. All that is necessary for a successful non-proliferation regime to function is the presumption that someone believes. As long as they can presume that someone believes, they have a reason to continue to act *as if* they believed disarmament were desirable, even though actually disarming would be irrational. The incentives of the system are structured such that acting *as if* they believed in the desirability of disarmament will lead to a collective motivation towards non-proliferation. Ultimately, it makes no difference if they actually believe, or are simply bluffing. As long as the actors behave rationally, the outcome will be the same.

This dynamic should be familiar to people acquainted with the logic of deterrence theory. A successful nuclear deterrent does not depend upon whether or not policymakers believe in their own commitment to carry out a nuclear threat. The behaviour of nuclear deterrence is explicitly justified and sustained with respect to the presumption that others believe. Thomas Schelling lays out the underlying logic in his explanation of the rationality of irrationality.[27] He argues that the rationality of nuclear deterrence does not rest on whether or not it is rational to carry out a nuclear attack, but rather on whether or not it is rational to make your opponent believe that you will do so. What policymakers want, after all, is what they can get from the threat value of a nuclear attack, not what they can get from actually carrying out the threat. The question, then, is not one of whether or not they would actually act on the intentions, but rather how to create the perception that they would.[28]

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26. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 186. Žižek explains the role of the other presumed to believe in the operation of ideology. Importantly, this assumed believer does not have to actually exist. The presumption of his or her existence is sufficient for the reality to function.
27. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 36–43.
28. Ibid.

Extended deterrence increased the stability of Cold War deterrence by transforming deterrence from a dyadic relationship into a much broader system. Following Schelling's logic about the rationality of irrationality, the Cold War system was built on the presumption that perceptions mattered as much as reality. Extended deterrence made the Cold War system more stable by increasing the number of actors who were invested in behaving as if they believed in the credibility of deterrent threats. Rather than being confronted by policymakers from only one other state behaving as if they believed in the credibility of an incredible threat, US and Soviet policymakers were confronted by many other states acting as if their threats were credible. Thus, even if neither the US nor the Soviet policymakers believed in the credibility of each other's threats, the perception that others did believe was constantly being reinforced, which in turn provided the justification to continue engaging in that same pattern of behaviour.

The interesting thing about this kind of collective behaviour, of which the Cold War system of extended deterrence is only one example, is that it can become self-sustaining even if no one actually believes in the sincerity of the behaviour on which the system is built. All that is necessary is that enough actors continue to behave as if they believed in order to sustain the presumption that the belief exists. The most common examples of this kind of behaviour are found in the economic realm. In its most extreme form, this pattern is what economists refer to as a 'bubble'. One of the most famous examples of an economic bubble in world history was the Dutch tulip mania during 1634–7. Desirable as a marker of social status, tulip bulbs were being bought and sold at ever-higher prices; the scarcer the variety of bulb, the higher the price. At the height of the craze, tulip bulbs were being traded on the Dutch market for the same price as a house located on one of the most desirable pieces of real estate in Amsterdam. When there was no longer anyone willing to pay the top prices, confidence in the value of tulips was undermined, and their price declined precipitously until they were worth practically nothing.[29] In other words, a bubble is a collective pattern of 'behaving *as if*', which can create and sustain patterns of behavior that might otherwise seem absurd.[30]

At its height during the 1980s, the Cold War arms race functioned as a bubble. Nuclear weapons were a currency of power, the value of which was not determined by their usefulness for the purposes of military action, but rather established through the demonstration of nuclear superiority for its own sake. If you push on the question of who it was that actually believed in the ability of the US to fight and win a nuclear war, what you find is that no one believed the nuclear balance of forces established. Everyone was in on the 'secret' that nuclear war was not winnable, and yet they all agreed it was best for the US to persist in the arms race with the Soviet Union because there were others out there that did believe in nuclear victory.

In their official public discourse, the secretaries of defence under Presidents Nixon and Carter both pointed to the existence of an external audience that they presumed

29. Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire* (New York: Random House, 2001), 63.
30. For an extended analysis of how nuclear weapons function as a currency of power, see Anne Harrington de Santana, 'Nuclear Weapons as the Currency of Power', *The Nonproliferation Review* 16, no. 3 (2009): 325–45.

believed the numerical balance of nuclear forces was a meaningful measure of American power.[31] At the same time, these officials were entirely aware of the illogic of a policy of numerical equality from a military perspective. For instance, James Schlesinger recognised that improvements in the US arsenal would not have a significant military effect, while still maintaining that 'there must be essential equivalence between the strategic forces of the U.S. and the Soviet Union – an equivalence perceived not only by ourselves, but by the Soviet Union and third audiences as well'.[32] Likewise, Harold Brown argued:

> The United States and its allies must be free from any coercion and intimidation that could result from perceptions of an overall imbalance or particular asymmetries in nuclear forces. … Insistence on essential equivalence guards against any danger that the Soviets might be seen as superior – even if the perception is not technically justified.[33]

Brown uses the passive voice in this passage to indicate the presence of an unidentified audience, who held the inaccurate perception that asymmetries in the nuclear balance would connote Soviet superiority.

This line of reasoning begs the question of who exactly these assumed believers were, and whether or not they actually existed. Although the Soviets were frequently cited as the target audience for the performance of the arms race, they were also frequently presumed to be in on the game, pursuing a 'theoretical war-winning capability' of their own.[34]

Digging deeper to find the *other presumed to believe* reveals that no one believed that a numerical balance of nuclear forces was meaningful under the conditions of mutual assured destruction. According to studies conducted by the Department of Defense and published in a volume entitled *International Perceptions of the Superpower Military Balance*, none of the populations studied perceived the numerical balance of nuclear forces as meaningful in an age of overkill. The studies included data from the US, Europe, the Middle East, Japan and even the Soviet Union, where officials were quoted as saying that 'parity is not the issue at hand'.[35]

Although there is no empirical evidence to support the existence of the assumed believer, what the empirical data reveals is that everyone shared in common the same cynical view of the world in which, although they themselves do not believe, there are others out there that do. These audiences continue to look to the military balance as significant not because they believe that the balance is significant, but because they believe that other important audiences perceive the military balance as significant. Choosing to persist in the truth – that nuclear war was unwinnable – could have serious consequences, in terms of domestic support, international allegiances and even the possibility of nuclear attack.

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31. Quoted in Kull, 'Nuclear Nonsense', 32.
32. Ibid., 31.
33. Ibid., 35.
34. Paul H. Nitze, 'Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente', *Foreign Affairs* 54, no. 2 (1976): 207 whose emphasis?
35. Kull, 'Nuclear Nonsense', 36.

In continuing to behave outwardly as if they believe, these audiences perpetuate the perception that there are assumed believers by reflecting the image of the assumed believer back at the policymakers. What I refer to as a bubble here, Steve Kull likens to a parlour game:

> The situation resembles nothing so much as a drawing-room comedy. All of the key characters know a certain secret – that strategic asymmetries are militarily irrelevant in an age of overkill – but because they think that others do not know the secret they act as if they do not know the secret either. A farcical quality emerges as all the characters, more or less unconsciously, collude to establish a norm of behavior based on a failure to recognize the secret.[36]

In this passage, Kull provides an accurate analysis of the dynamics of extended deterrence. Whether or not deterrence, and extended deterrence in particular, is a desirable policy is a question that can only be accurately evaluated once the behaviour is properly understood. The same is true for non-proliferation. The desirability of non-proliferation and disarmament policies can only be evaluated once we properly understand the role that the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons plays in a strategy of non-proliferation.

The Strategy of Non-proliferation and the Goal of Disarmament

The argument that non-proliferation may require the credibility of an incredible pledge to disarm is my claim, not that of Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn. Importantly, the claim is not that any of these current or former statesmen are thinking about disarmament in terms of credibility. There is no reason to believe that their advocacy of disarmament is disingenuous, or that they see any connection between the logic of non-proliferation and the logic of extended deterrence. They could be thinking along these lines behind closed doors, but ultimately what they actually believe is impossible to prove. Even if you ask them, the system provides a rational incentive for them to answer that they do believe even if they do not. My claim is that, regardless of what they themselves believe, their current policy agenda will not produce disarmament – even in the long term. What they themselves believe about whether or not disarmament is a realistic goal is irrelevant under the logic of my argument as long as they continue to act rationally (i.e. as long as they do not unilaterally disarm).

Non-proliferation is usually characterised as a step along the way to disarmament. Yet, what this reinterpretation of non-proliferation as a strategy much like the strategy of extended deterrence reveals is just the opposite. Non-proliferation is not a step along the way to disarmament. In fact, effective non-proliferation policies actually decrease the likelihood that the US will eliminate its nuclear weapons. The desire to eliminate nuclear weapons has a lot to do with the perception of nuclear danger. In so far as non-proliferation reduces nuclear danger, it also reduces the incentive to disarm.

Every meaningful diplomatic agreement about nuclear technology has occurred during a period of heightened tension. For instance, the US and Soviet Union concluded

36. Ibid, 36.

the Limited Test Ban Treaty shortly after the Cuban missile crisis, and serious negotiations on the NPT began after mainland China tested in 1964 and it appeared that the cascade of new nuclear powers would spin out of control. Yet, by quelling those fears, arms control and non-proliferation treaties also quell the political will to take meaningful action on essential aspects of disarmament such as the establishment of an international fuel bank, or United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reform.

The current renaissance in disarmament occurs amid new fears of nuclear dangers: the proliferation of nuclear weapons programmes (India, Pakistan and North Korea); Iran's development of a uranium enrichment programme; the discovery of A.Q. Kahn's black market in nuclear materials; and the threat of nuclear terrorism posed by new non-state terrorist groups. Nuclear terrorism, in particular, provides a challenge to the power of the US and the other recognised nuclear weapon states (Russia, England, France and China) because it confounds the logic of deterrence. Non-state terrorist groups have no 'return address'.[37] Since retaliation in kind is not possible, nuclear terrorism sits outside the conceptual bounds of deterrence.

While President Obama has placed a vision of a world free of nuclear weapons at the centre of his nuclear agenda, his administration has consistently prioritised agenda items that reduce nuclear danger through non-proliferation and arms control, rather than tackling the much tougher items that would form the basis for an effective practice of disarmament. For instance, in April 2010, President Obama hosted more than 47 international leaders in Washington, DC for a Nuclear Security Summit. This summit was the largest gathering of world leaders since 1945 when Truman hosted representatives of 50 countries in San Francisco, where they met to draw up the UN charter. Attendees included the nuclear weapon states, the three states with nuclear weapons that are not party to the NPT and non-nuclear weapon states representing the non-aligned movement.[38] However, the focus of the summit was not the elimination of nuclear weapons, but rather securing nuclear materials in order to prevent the possibility of nuclear terrorism. While preventing nuclear terrorism is a desirable goal, the aim of the summit was modest and incremental in comparison to its historic precedent in the founding of the UN. Significantly, President Obama announced the New Start Treaty at the summit, an arms limitation and inspections agreement with Russia, the success of which was intended to demonstrate his administration's pursuit of disarmament. In contrast, agreements that would actually fundamentally change the relationship of states to the physical embodiment of nuclear weapons, such as the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, were conspicuously absent from the agenda.[39]

At the same time that the Obama administration is actively promoting a nuclear agenda that places the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons at the centre of US nuclear security policy, the president is up-front about the fact that he does not yet know

37. Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn, 'A World Free of Nuclear Weapons', A15.
38. Sarah J. Diehl and Paula Humphrey, 'The April 2010 Nuclear Security Summit: One More Step toward the Mountaintop', The Nuclear Threat Initiative, available at: http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_nuclear_security_summit.html (accessed 22 June 2010).
39. 'Nuclear Security Summit, Washington D.C., April 12–13, 2010', US Department of State, available at: http://fpc.state.gov/c35775.htm (accessed 6 May 2011).

how to overcome the structural incentives of the current system in order to attain the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons. In spite of the danger posed by new nuclear threats, he also recognises that great powers continue to pose a potential threat to one another. In April 2009, Obama laid out a nuclear security agenda in which he committed himself to the goal of 'the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons'.[40] However, he emphasised the difficulty of envisioning such a world in his speech saying, 'This goal will not be reached quickly – perhaps not in my lifetime.'[41] Just as he cannot see past his own death in order to manipulate a future in which he is no longer an active participant, he is unable to see past the 'death' of nuclear weapons whose presence mediates international political relations between the great powers.

Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn are similarly up-front about the fact that they do not have concrete steps to a world free of nuclear weapons. Instead of laying out concrete steps to complete nuclear disarmament, Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn reason through analogy and metaphor, choosing images of progress to hold out the promise of a future in which disarmament becomes possible. Emphasising the promise of abolishing an unjust two-tiered system of nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapon states, they explicitly employ an analogy between the goal of disarmament and the commitment to equality in the US Declaration of Independence, pointing out that, although unattainable at the time, a commitment to the vision that 'all men are created equal' has brought the US step by step closer to this ideal.[42] In the absence of a clear description of how and when disarmament will be possible, they employ the metaphor of climbing a mountain to express the relationship between the steps they recommend and their ultimate goal:

> In some respects, the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons is like the top of a very tall mountain. From the vantage point of our troubled world today, we can't even see the top of the mountain, and it is tempting and easy to say we can't get there from here. But the risks from continuing to go down the mountain or standing pat are too real to ignore. We must chart a course to higher ground where the mountaintop becomes more visible.[43]

This image is effective at communicating a positive relationship between these statesmen's recommended measures and the goal of disarmament, while in the same breath explaining that disarmament is not yet realistic.

The action steps on the Nuclear Security Project's agenda are consistent with a meta-level commitment to progress towards disarmament defined as zero nuclear weapons.[44] However, they are also consistent with the practice of non-proliferation and the

40. Quoted in George Perkovich, 'The Obama Nuclear Agenda One Year after Prague', *Policy Outlook*, 31 March 2010.
41. Barack Obama, 'Remarks by President Barack Obama', The White House, available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered (accessed 21 June 2010).
42. *Nuclear Tipping Point*, film, directed by Ben Goddard, Hoover Institution, 2010.
43. George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger and Sam Nunn, 'Toward a Nuclear Free World', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 January 2008; Nuclear Security Project, 'Steps to a Safer World', available at: http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/site/c.mjJXJbMMIoE/b.3534735/k.6B6B/Steps_to_a_Safer_World.htm (accessed 25 August 2010).
44. Nuclear Security Project, 'Steps to a Safer World'.

maintenance of a minimum deterrent by the nuclear weapon states. Take, for instance, step four: 'Initiating a bipartisan process with the U.S. Senate, including understandings to increase confidence and provide for periodic review, to achieve ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, taking advantage of recent technical advances, and working to secure ratification by other key states.' Ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty would actually have a meaningful effect on the prospects for disarmament because it reflects a commitment to decreasing dependence on the physical presence of nuclear weapons. Yet, as written, Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn are not advocating ratification. Instead, they are advocating the meta-level steps of 'initiating a bilateral process' and 'working to secure ratification'. Ultimately, there is no more evidence to suggest that a programme of non-proliferation like the steps Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn suggest would lead to disarmament than there is to suggest that a programme of extended deterrence will lead to victory in nuclear war.

Conclusion

As currently formulated, the framework of the nuclear disarmament renaissance will renew the collective practice of non-proliferation, but will not successfully eliminate nuclear weapons. It will restore the power of nuclear weapons by placing them back at the centre of a stable international diplomatic consensus organised around the presumption of *an other presumed to believe* in nuclear disarmament. The key to the NPT as a mechanism of consensus is that it expresses a common human interest in confronting the threat to humanity posed by nuclear war. By behaving as if their pledge to disarm were credible, the nuclear weapon states continually renew their acknowledgement of the fundamental equality of all peoples while postponing its formal achievement. Whether or not any of these states actually believe in disarmament is irrelevant as long as they perceive it to be in their interest to act *as if* they do.

As the instability of the non-proliferation regime over the past decade has already proven, the problem with the approach Obama shares in common with Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn is that the credibility of an incredible pledge to disarm cannot be sustained indefinitely. The disarmament movement will have to develop a more stable solution to the problem of nuclear danger. If there is one lesson to be learned from this article's analysis of the relationship between non-proliferation and disarmament, it is that thinking of disarmament as a goal or a destination will place it forever out of reach. In order to be successful, disarmament must be a practice in its own right in which the international community will be continuously engaged. In other words, disarmament requires a strategy because creating a nuclear-weapon-free world is less like climbing a mountain and more like jumping off a cliff. Simply stepping off the edge will not teach you how to fly.

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