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Should more of our European or Pacific democratic allies possess nuclear weapons?

STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

From the Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict at the Hoover Institution

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Military History in Contemporary Conflict

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Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

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A History of Nuclear Choices

By Josef Joffe

I.

The question "Should more of our European or Pacific democratic allies possess nuclear weapons?" harbors two unspoken ones. First, why do nations go nuclear? Second, will America's allies do so if U.S. security guarantees wane in this era of retraction and disarmament? A quick history of the nuclear age reveals many mixed motives and only a tenuous relationship between great-power assurances and client-power abstinence.

Why do nations reach for the Bomb? The best explanation is "competitive proliferation." The U.S. launched the Manhattan Project to pre-empt Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union went nuclear because the U.S. had done so. France and Britain wanted their own deterrents against the U.S.S.R. China explicitly invoked the "superpowers' monopoly on nuclear weapons" to justify its own acquisition.

After the First Five, the story becomes more complicated. India was surely eying Beijing's Bomb when it exploded a nuclear device in 1974. But the main purpose was to offset the conventional superiority of the giant next door, who had taught India a bloody lesson in the 1962 border war. Another target was India's archrival Pakistan, with whom it had fought three wars since 1947. A national deterrent might instill some rationality in a not-so-rational state. For Pakistan, a nuclear power since 1998, the Bomb also had more than one purpose. It created a balance of terror vis-à-vis New Delhi, equalized a vast imbalance of conventional power, and boosted Pakistan's international standing.

The Bomb-as-great-equalizer was also the main reason for Israel's program. As last resort, nuclear weapons would neutralize the massive numerical superiority of its Arab foes, which were

being fed by a steady stream of Soviet arms since the 1950s. How does "extended deterrence," or the credibility of great-power guarantees, fit into this tangled web?

When Israel launched its program in the mid-Fifties, it had no great-power protector; so for a nation of 3 million facing 200 million Arabs sworn to its annihilation, the nuclear option was a no-brainer once France had provided the technological underpinning. Saddam's Iraq, on the other hand, was a Soviet ally in all but name—the beneficiary of Soviet instructors and arms. And yet, Saddam chose the nuclear road, which was rudely blocked by the Israeli Air Force when it bombed the Osirak reactor in 1981. His target, by the way, was not Israel, but Iran.

Next door, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's Iran was sheltered by America's strategic umbrella, and yet it was this good friend of the West who first set foot on the nuclear road by buying four German reactors in 1975. The goal was a complete fuel cycle, hence a weapons option as a by-product, never mind Iran's American protector. The main thrust was directed against Tehran's Arab rivals, above all, Iraq. In addition, nuclear weapons offered a nice shortcut to regional primacy, a logic that animates the Islamic Republic as well. Today, it consists of the 3 D's: dominate the Arab states; deter (or destroy) Israel; devalue the conventional might of the United States in the Greater Middle East.

The historical record is one of complex motives. The First Five practiced competitive proliferation. Israel, India, and Pakistan went "asymmetric proliferation" to equalize the conventional edge held by their neighbors. Iran and Iraq, though allied to superpowers, eyed regional status and each other. In short, there does not seem to be a significant relationship between "extended deterrence" and nuclear abstinence. France and Britain went nuclear although they enjoyed 24-carat guarantees by the U.S. They acquired the Bomb as a shiny badge of great-power status that nuclear weapons were thought to confer.

Harold Melvin Agnew Motion Picture Film, Hoover Institution Archives.

In the case of Iran and Iraq, other interests—regional rivalries, exalted status—proved stronger than alliance with the U.S., respectively the U.S.S.R. Ditto for an American client like Pakistan; its regional fears and ambitions counted for more than America's commitment to its security against India. To extend this line of reasoning: China has always been an implicit ally of North Korea, and yet Pyongyang reached for the Bomb in order to intimidate Japan and South Korea and to extract material benefits from nuclear blackmail.

II.

The strongest relationship between guarantees and non-proliferation seems to reign in the German, Japanese, and South Korean cases. For decades, all three have had the technology and the resources to go nuclear in short order. West Germany even played with a nuclear (plutonium) option in the 1960s by acquiring key components such as reprocessing and a "fast (plutonium) breeder." These as well as fuel-element fabrication have since been abandoned, and the country's power plants are slated for extinction in 2022. This is de-proliferation to the max.

This trio stands out as special case. The security guarantees extended to them have been the strongest in the annals of inter-state politics. In the past, alliance commitments were often not worth the paper they were written on; clients were abandoned at the first reversal of fortunes. But in the case of the Trio, the guarantees were signed in flesh and blood, so to speak: with massive U.S. deployments on their soil, flanked by tactical and, in the German case, intermediate-range nuclear weapons. These emplacements signaled 24/7: If you attack our ally, you attack the United States. This was known as the "tripwire strategy" that would entangle the U.S. ab initio.

So there was very little ambiguity about the U.S. commitment. After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the withdrawal of all Russian forces from Central and Eastern Europe in 1994, the issue did not come up during twenty years of Russia's decline. At present, the issue is slowly moving forward because Putin's Russia is on an expansionist course while Obama's America is abandoning its classic role as "security lender of the last resort" in favor of retraction and disarmament. In Europe, the U.S. military presence is down to one-tenth of its peak of 300,000.

Realist theory would predict that Germany as Europe's no. 1 would now start to rethink its anti-nuclear stance. Yet nothing could be farther from reality. Germany's total denuclearization is so ingrained in the culture that this particular dog won't even yawn, let alone bark in the night. The country that once thrust its armies to the gates of Moscow and Cairo is now down to a force of 180,000—down from a combined East and West German total of 675,000. Its defense spending has dropped from 3 to 1.4 percent of GDP. Still, the most critical point is a nuclear allergy without parallel in the rest of the West. No nukes in Germany's future.

The angst is flanked by good strategic reasons. Germany and Europe do not see a strategic threat in Russia rediviva; for them, the threat is refugees and illegal immigrants, who cannot be battled with tanks, let alone nuclear weapons. The scene in Asia is different. Here, China's neighbors are confronted with an expansive grand strategy coupled to rearmament growing at double-digit rates. The East Asians see a China that is probing America's positions in the Western Pacific and an Obama administration that is vacillating between two fratricidal roles. One is to reassert, but rather meekly, America's alliance commitments. The other is to play the referee in the various territorial spats between China on one side and Hanoi, Tokyo, and Manila on the other.

Given Obama's uncertain trumpet and his "come home, America," the Asian allies are recalculating their interests. Japan, above all, is shifting from decades of pacifism to rearmament

and assertiveness. South Korea, on the other hand, is still waiting it out on the sidelines. Its formidable arms are not configured for power projection in the Western Pacific.

With a view to East Asia, Realist theory would insist: Surely the growing imbalance of power in East Asia will feed the nuclear impetus. Yet it is still all but impossible to see how Realist logic would segue into a real-life weapons program.

First, even while Japan is slowly emerging from its cocoon of constitutionally mandated pacifism, the country's nuclear allergy has not subsided—and for more rational reasons than German nuclear angst. After all, Japan was the victim of history's first nuclear war.

Second, Japan still has to live down its old imperialist past. This legacy continues to fester because the country has not really tried for reconciliation with its former victims. Going nuclear might raise these resentments exponentially, weakening rather than strengthening Tokyo's role as a leader of anti-Chinese containment.

Finally, it may be too late. A Tokyo that no longer felt safe under America's umbrella, may simply be self-deterred in view of a Chinese giant who might—just might—pre-empt Japan's nuclearization with a conventional or even nuclear attack. South Korea is a more ambiguous case. On the one hand, Seoul practices a policy of propitiation toward Russia, China, and occasionally North Korea. On the other hand, its North Korean foe is a standing invitation to competitive proliferation. Seoul's refusal to heed American pressure to abandon pyro reprocessing might be a straw in the wind that blows in a nuclear direction.

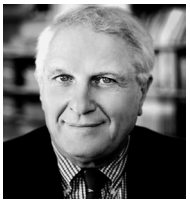
Seoul insists that pyro reprocessing is for fuel-waste disposal only. Alas, reprocessing is also the way to a plutonium bomb, which is why the U.S. is so adamant. So Seoul might well want to preserve a nuclear option for plausible grand-strategic reasons. Precisely because cutting deals

with Moscow and Beijing could alienate Washington while emboldening Pyongyang, a national deterrent might offer the perfect antidote. It would endow the country with an irreducible measure of existential security, hence the freedom to deal, wheel, and maneuver.

III.

Does retraction cause nuclearization? The evidence remains ambiguous. Other things being equal, America's withdrawal phase will not trigger new nukes. But "other things" stay rarely equal in the life of nations. So this sanguine bet will change if things don't remain the same: if Russia and China double down on their expansionism, if the U.S. continues to add irresolution to withdrawal, if stylized conflicts in East Asia and Eastern Europe escalate into the real thing.

This downside scenario contains a moral for U.S. grand strategy. Perhaps retraction has little effect on proliferation. But it will have big effects on America's position in the world and on stability in the two crisis theaters on Russia's and China's periphery. Like nature, international politics abhors a vacuum. And if it persists long enough, even the most peace-minded allies might get off the anti-nuclear wagon in order to recalculate the costs and benefits of abstentionism.



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The Scramble for Nuclear Deterrence

By Williamson Murray

Given the diplomatic and strategic weaknesses that the United States and its leaders have exhibited over the past six years, it is almost inevitable that America's allies, which exist in substantially more dangerous neighborhoods than does the United States, will seek to develop their own nuclear capabilities. Some may well have embarked on that course already, at least to the extent of designing, fashioning parts, and laying away the nuclear material necessary to construct nuclear weapons. The case for developing and possessing such weapons is more obvious and pressing in the Middle East and the Pacific than it appears to be in Europe. But even in Europe, Russia's behavior has created the uncertainty necessary to push the Poles and the Germans to think about creating a nuclear deterrent.

For the Germans the existence of a strong Poland, as well as the French and British nuclear arsenals, provides a certain sense of security that makes it doubtful that the Germans would go nuclear. But the Poles are another matter. They face substantially different strategic and geo-political realities. Should the United States continue its drift toward isolationism and removal of its military and strategic presence in Europe, memory of centuries-long mistreatment at the hands of the Russians may well drive the Poles toward creating a nuclear option for their military forces. The fact that the Russian military ended a recent major war game by launching a tactical nuclear weapon at Warsaw can do little to reassure the Poles about President Obama's announcement about "peace in our time."

The Middle East presents an even more depressing picture. Over the past half-century, radical regimes committed to revolutionary change in the region have aspired to create

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their own nuclear capabilities, justified at least to their internal constituencies by Israel's possession of such weapons. Clearly, Saddam Hussein's Iraq was heading toward the creation of a nuclear capability until the Gulf War in 1991 wrecked Iraqi pretensions to be a great power and the intense pressure of the subsequent UN inspection routine eliminated the Iraqi program. The potential of Iraqi possession of their own nuclear weapons was particularly dangerous because of the fact that Saddam had every intention of using such weapons in a war with the Israelis. Assad's Syrians were following the same trajectory until the Israeli raid of 2007 eliminated their facility. That left the Iranian program, which has moved haltingly toward the creation of nuclear weapons, delayed by the cyber attack on their computer systems by either the Israelis or the Americans—or both. At present, the Iranians are close to the creation of nuclear capabilities. How close is a matter of debate, but close enough to cause serious fears throughout the Gulf and in Israel. A continued American withdrawal from the region will undoubtedly push the Saudis toward crossing the nuclear threshold; and while that capability should raise few qualms, the successors to the present rulers are another matter.

At present North Asia is one of the most dangerous areas in the world in spite of its enormous economic successes. The mere presence of a nuclear-armed North Korea, which has displayed considerable powers of survival, provides a rude reminder that peaceful relations are not necessarily at the heart of the strategic policies of the various powers in the region. China already possesses nuclear weapons, which, with its exceedingly

aggressive aims and steadily increasing military capabilities, provides a serious threat to regional stability.

The other major players in the region, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, all have the capability to build serious nuclear capabilities without great difficulties. One might think that the American pivot towards Asia and away from Europe and the Middle East would reassure America's allies in the region. Unfortunately, the Obama administration has performed its change of America's strategic focus with all the ineptitude and lack of sophistication of Joachim Ribbentrop's diplomatic moves, but with little sense of the mailed fist that underlay Nazi moves.

The current Chinese assertion to their claims to the Senkaku Islands underline a strategic policy aimed at returning Asia to the sixteenth century, when China dominated not only Southeast Asia, but East Asia as well. The possibility that oil underlies the Senkaku chain further exacerbates the tension between China and Japan. But the real problem is the fact that centuries of conflict between the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans mark the region's historical background. Each power has its own narrative of the past, none of them connected with a serious examination of what really happened in the past. The presence of significant numbers of American troops along with America's nuclear umbrella has so far dampened down the desire of the Koreans and Japanese to go nuclear. Hiroshima and Nagasaki have added to the Japanese forbearance.

But to a considerable extent, a belief in the efficacy of deterrence rests on perceptions. A feeling among Japanese leaders that they cannot rely on the United States will lead them to create their own nuclear capabilities. The same will hold true for the Koreans, while

the Taiwanese probably already possess nuclear weapons. In the end, what will drive the continued stability of East Asia and the willingness of these highly sophisticated powers not to cross the nuclear threshold will be the perception that the United States will stand by its allies. And that perception has slowly ebbed away over the past decade. The wretched picture American leaders—not to mention the Europeans—have made over Russian actions against the Ukraine has only exacerbated perceptions of America's decline.

Williamson Murray serves as a Minerva Fellow at the Naval War College. He graduated from Yale University in 1963 with honors in history. He then served five years as an officer in the US Air Force, including a tour in Southeast Asia with the 314th Tactical Airlift Wing (C-130s). He returned to Yale University, where he received his PhD in military-diplomatic history under advisers Hans Gatzke and Donald Kagan. He taught two years in the Yale history department before moving on to Ohio State University in fall 1977 as a military and diplomatic historian; in 1987 he received the Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award. He retired from Ohio State in 1995 as a professor emeritus of history.

The Risks of Expanding the Nuclear Club's Membership

By Josiah Bunting III

Vladimir Putin's indifference to the bleating admonitions of Western leaders will persist. These, and the President's pathetic warnings that have followed, have all the credibility of promising a Red Line in Damascus. His invasion of the Crimea and the continuing Russian sustenance of the separatist movement in east Ukraine are accomplished facts. To send small bands of American paratroopers into Russia's former republics, now members of NATO, reprises the function, in the early Cold War period, of "trip wire" troop deployments in the early days of the North Atlantic Treaty. By Article 5, still in effect, today's 28 members remain obliged to provide appropriate support to any member under attack from another polity.

The "tactical" nuclear option is assumed off the table: just as it has been since August 9, 1945, when, three days after Hiroshima the War Department authorized a second attack on Nagasaki: its object certainly was to make the Japanese believe there were more bombs where these came from.

No power has used a nuclear weapon since, "tactical" or otherwise. Is it conceivable that, among the hundreds of such instruments still deployed, one, or some, might be used in desperation? Or by accident? Supposing America's credibility as a guarantor of its NATO allies' security suffers—if possible—further erosion? Supposing prospective perpetrators can secure "access," against all security measures? A "tactical nuke," in use, invariably invites a response in kind. Could this happen?

Wars, as the earliest pages of Thucydides remind us, (and as the death, in Sarajevo, of an Austrian Archduke, in 1914, and the events immediately following make plain) whatever their causes,

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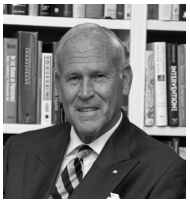
are first the consequence of occasions of which contemporaries but rarely imagine the consequences that will follow therefrom. Non-strategic nuclear weapons, still deployed (however reduced their numbers) among the 26 European members of NATO and their prospective adversaries can be the bludgeons of fallible or aggrieved or purblind men. Thucydides offered another timeless admonition, to a set policy bent on war. He put it into the mouth of an ambassador from Corinth, now speaking to the Spartan Assembly: "You have not yet begun to consider what sorts of people are these Athenians whom you may have to fight." Miscalculations take many forms. Miscalculation is, more often than not, the mother of war.



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It's Better Not to Play with Nukes

By Ralph Peters

The problem is that, if one of the children gets a new toy, all of the other kids want a new toy, too. Nor is this remark flippant, since a crucial issue here is the emotional maturity of the government, state, and population in question: matters of reliability and self-restraint. One might make a strong case for the possession of a deterrent nuclear capability by Poland or South Korea, but how then to deny the "right" of deeply troubled Turkey (a NATO member) or even hostile Iran to acquire a nuclear arsenal?

In the latter case, the answer appears obvious to us: Iran could not be trusted and might well initiate first-use—or, as a minimum, become the de facto regional hegemon. But from the Iranian perspective, that is a gross and intolerable double standard. As for Turkey, possession of a nuclear capability would further exacerbate the nuclear arms race already underway in the Middle East and South Asia.

And the strategic math is not simple addition. Adding additional nuclear powers does not increase the chance of nuclear use by one, or two, or three, but exponentially.

Regarding the interests of the United States, staunch opposition to nuclear proliferation is of the highest importance, both because important American clients—above all, Israel—are the likeliest first-use targets, but also because of the potential, however remote, of millenarian terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons or the control thereof.

The gravest threat—again, however irrational it may appear to us—comes from regimes led by apocalyptic visionaries. Iran leaps to mind (but we should worry about the changing tone in

Pakistan, as well). While the madcap, if entertaining, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been removed from office and the Shia cartel holding power is reputed to plot rationally (if savagely), the future of Iran is far less predictable and, perhaps, far less stable than we currently grasp.

The best policy, then, is "No new nuclear powers." On the other hand, the worst policy is the creeping unilateral U.S. nuclear disarmament envisioned by the Obama administration.

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Nuclear Anti-Strategy

By Angelo M. Codevilla

Nuclear energy—a fortiori nuclear weapons—has occasioned the U.S. ruling class, with exceptions few and brief, to jettison reason about ends and means in favor of emotional reactions that abstract from interests, friends, and enemies.

The ur-text of this mindset, Bernard Brodie's The Absolute Weapon (1946), fostered the notion that the atom bomb had rendered war meaningless and had reduced mankind's options to peace or annihilation. Three quarters of a century without either have not dented that ideology. So powerful was that mindset as to lead otherwise serious people seriously to propose sharing America's then-monopoly of nukes with the Soviet Union, expecting that the United Nations would wield the Absolute sword in the interest universal peace.

In the subsequent decades, the U.S. government continued to show more faith in deals with the Soviet Union concerning nuclear weapons than in the power of America's allies. U.S. opposition to France's development of nuclear weapons, and its insistence that Britain's (which had partnered in the Manhattan Project) be subordinated to Washington's did much to alienate Europe from America. It discredited pro-American elements, and contributed to the rise of anti America elites.

The U.S. policy of non-proliferation has deprived America of allies while failing to stem the nuclearization of enemies.

The U.S. policy of "non-proliferation" is as willfully blind strategically as it is un-realistic about human motivation, and technically ignorant. The fundamental questions answer themselves: 1) if it is proper for the U.S. to possess nuclear weapons, why should the citizens of country X, Y, or

Z consider it improper for themselves to possess them? Considering that any number of peoples now produce more highly qualified technical personnel than does the U.S., what might keep them from developing nuclear weapons if they want them? 3) Does the character of a people and the orientation of its government make a difference regarding whether its possession of nuclear weapons adds or subtracts from the interests of the United States?

Angelo M. Codevilla, a native of Italy, is a professor emeritus of international relations at Boston University. He was a US naval officer and Foreign Service officer and served on the Senate Intelligence Committee as well as on presidential transition teams. For a decade he was a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution. He is the author of thirteen books, including *War Ends and Means, Informing Statecraft, The Character of Nations, Advice to War Presidents*, and *A Students' Guide to International Relations*. He is a student of the classics as well as of European literature; he is also a commercial grape grower.

Preserve What We Inherited

By Victor Davis Hanson

There were various reasons why our grandparents sought to limit the availability of nuclear weapons in general and in particular among even our allies. I can think of three.

First, during the Cold War there was a notion of a solid-front, anti-communist "West" led by the U.S. and Europe, and ultimately defensible by the nuclear capabilities of the U.S. and to a lesser extent France and Great Britain. The small number of Western powers with a nuclear deterrent to the U.S.S.R. had the effect of grouping by needs other allied, but non-nuclear nations (e.g., Germany, the smaller European states, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, etc.) around a common cause and defense. Although France often freelanced, ultimately the Soviet Union accepted that French deterrent forces were firmly in the U.S. camp as part of a collective NATO alliance. Such solidarity transcended the post-Cold War age and is still valuable against new radical Islamists and their sponsors as well. The restriction of nuclear weapons helped to solidify and focus Western agendas.

Second, there were lots of anomalies in the nuclear club. A strong Germany did not go nuclear; yet, its historic rivals and often weaker states, France and Britain, did. Like it or not, the causation of three European wars was eliminated, in the sense that non-nuclear Germany did not seek to transform its ascendant economic dynamism into military power or territorial acquisition. The same was true of Japan. An accepted consequence was that the neighbors of the old Axis powers, for the first time in decades were relieved of their ancient worries. Age old-tensions between Japan and South Korea (or for that matter Taiwan as well), or Germany and France largely grew dormant. Today's EU tensions between a creditor Germany and its European borrowers, or Japan's new muscularity that worries South Korea would only be magnified with the expansion of the nuclear club.

Finally, in a narrower sense, U.S. security was enhanced by limiting the number of nations, both friends and foes, with access to nuclear weapons. By assuring allies that they reside inside the American nuclear umbrella, we have reduced the chances that we will have our version of a renegade North Korea that is both used by, but also at times ignores, China. Constitutional government is a frail enterprise and we never know which stable ally today may prove unstable tomorrow; such volatility is manageable if they remain not nuclear.

The key to such geostrategic stability is the constant reassurance from the U.S. that our allies, which certainly have the technological savvy to make nuclear weapons quickly, do not need them, given that their cities are as sacrosanct as ours, and their defense needs dovetail with our own. Any fissures in that once granite-like commitment, real or imagined, will unwind the entire postwar system. The Western version of the dissolution that we are now witnessing in the Middle East would be an escalation of bickering among our allies to the point that some chose their own strategic defense—mostly in worries that the old U.S. guarantees were no longer iron-clad.

Let us pray that present flirtations with "lead from behind" and doubts about American exceptionalism remain rhetorical and do not convince friends abroad that we freeing our allies to deal on their own with regional hegemonies like Iran, Russia, or China.

The result will be chaos unlike we have seen since 1945.

Victor Davis Hanson, the Martin and Illie Anderson Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, is a classicist and an expert on the history of war. He is a syndicated Tribune Media Services columnist and a regular contributor to *National Review Online*, as well as many other national and international publications; he has written or edited twenty-three books, including the *New York Times* best seller *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*. His most recent book is *The Savior Generals: How Five Great Commanders Saved Wars That Were Lost - from Ancient Greece to Iraq* (Bloomsbury 2013). He was awarded a National Humanities Medal by President Bush in 2007 and the Bradley Prize in 2008 and has been a visiting professor at the US Naval Academy, Stanford University, Hillsdale College, and Pepperdine University. Hanson received a PhD in classics from Stanford University in 1980.

Who Possesses Nuclear Weapons, Not the Weapons, Is the Question

By Bruce Thornton

Since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear weapons have attracted an apocalyptic glamour that has confused and distorted the strategic calculations that should determine their production and deployment. The same sort of irrational response greeted the development of bombers in the 20s and 30s, when lurid scenarios of the civilization-ending power of strategic bombing—popularized in novels like H.G. Wells' Things to Come and exploited by pacifists—convinced British military planners and politicians that they should avoid war at all costs, for as Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin famously, and erroneously, proclaimed to the "man in the street," "There is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed," for "the bomber will always get through."

This sort of exaggeration was instrumental in enabling Neville Chamberlain's diplomatic fiasco at Munich, which was greeted with joyous celebrations across England and "an immense sense of physical relief," as MP and diplomat Harold Nicolson wrote, "in that I shall not be afraid tonight of the German bombs." During the Cold War the nuclear disarmament movements employed the same lurid scenarios, and similarly facilitated the appeasing policies in the West that emboldened the Soviet Union and made winning that conflict even more difficult. The possibility of a massive nuclear exchange made many people conclude that nothing, not even living under brutal totalitarian regimes, was worth risking that outcome. Such an attitude empowered aggressors willing to bluff and threaten their way to achieving their aims.

Discussions of nuclear weapons, then, need to focus not on lurid scenarios of destruction. After all, conventional bombing with high explosives and incendiaries accounted for more than half of 500,000 Japanese killed from the air during World War II. And conventional weapons destroyed almost all of Germany's major cities and killed 350,000. The much greater destructive potential of nuclear weapons must be balanced against their deterrent power, which arguably prevented the Cold War from turning into World War III and a reprise of the World War II's massive slaughter.

The most important consideration, then, in discussing nuclear weapons and proliferation is who possesses them, not the weapons per se. Rather than promoting utopian schemes to eliminate all nuclear weapons, we should concentrate on keeping them out of the hands of totalitarian and autocratic regimes. Countries like the U.S., England, France, and Israel all have governments defined by the rule of law, transparency, political accountability, civilian control of the military, and an institutionalized commitment to human rights and freedom. That's why we don't lose sleep at night worrying about their nuclear arsenals. China and Russia lack those safeguards, but are ruled by regimes with material goals they are unlikely to sacrifice their lives for—provided they know the West cannot be bluffed or intimidated. Even a lunatic state like North Korea can be controlled if its leaders are convinced that they will pay a heavy price for their adventurism.

A state like Iran, however, is another story. Its religious rulers embrace an apocalyptic theology and practice a faith that historically has proven—and is proving across the Middle East today—its willingness to kill in the service of its god and his commands. We cannot gamble that the mullahs' messianic theology is not as important as their material benefits and goals. England and France made that mistake in 1938 when they dismissed Hitler's violent racist philosophy as mere rhetoric not as important as the more traditional material goals of ambitious warlords.

We shouldn't worry, then, about liberal democracies like South Korea and Japan acquiring some nuclear weapons to defend themselves and to support our defense of our interests and security.

We should do everything to prevent an illiberal theocracy like Iran possessing such destructive power. And we should restore America's deterrent credibility—based in part on its nuclear arsenal—to convince other rogue regimes from going down the nuclear road.

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Discussion Questions

Should more of our European or Pacific democratic allies possess nuclear weapons?

1. What is the relationship between human nature and the evolution of military strategy and technology?

2. Have nuclear weapons changed war for good, or will there someday be a counter-weapon that ends the protocols of the nuclear age?

3. How long will tanks and aircraft carriers remain vital?

4. Do military revolutions change war or just the appearance of war?

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