

“Nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”

OK then, how about agreeing never to start one?

[Aaron Tovish, Zona Libre, April 2019]

Reagan coined the phrase and Gorbachev endorse it at their Geneva Summit. Yet, at that time, and to this day, both powers retain the option of initiating nuclear war. Not all nuclear powers retain that option; India and China have both renounced it from the moment each acquired nuclear weapons. So, what gives: Why do some nuclear powers forswear starting nuclear war while others insist upon it?

Let's be clear, renunciation of first use doesn't rule out in-kind retaliatory use. (But neither does it, in itself, sanction second use.) So what we are talking about ruling out is resort to nuclear arms in essentially three scenarios:

- out of the blue, launching an unprovoked, surprise, nuclear attack;
- during a serious crisis, getting in a first strike on the presumption that, if not, the adversary will;
- in the midst of a conventional conflict, escalating to nuclear warfare in the hope the adversary will back off.

Aside from immediately ranking as the worst crime of aggression of all time, a bolt-from-the-blue is a terrible idea for two very practical reasons. First, a mature nuclear arsenal is designed to withstand such an attack and have the capacity to retaliate massively. Thus, a surprise attack invites a predictable retaliation. (No winners.) Second, even a major nuclear power attempting to overwhelm a minor nuclear power* would have to use massive nuclear firepower. Nuclear detonation in or near cities would ignite firestorms which would radical disrupt the global climate, thereby not only making enemies of the rest of the world, but also boomeranging back on the aggressor. (See www.nucleardarkness.org .)

Note that a bolt-from-the-blue is not a failure of deterrence, since deterrence posits itself in the realm of rational actors. The perpetrator of a bolt-from-the-blue must be categorized as profoundly deranged, if the word insanity is to have any meaning at all. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a leader (or usurper a la Dr. Strangelove) gaining the necessary cooperation to pull off such an atrocity. The other two potential types of first use do derive from deterrence, and thus represent failures of deterrence.

Retaining the option to get in the first strike is, in a crisis, a recipe for uncontrolled nuclear escalation. If either side believes (rightly or wrongly) that there is a marginally positive difference between being struck first or striking first, it will be sorely tempted to do the later as long as the crisis persists. Unfortunately, the level of suspicion can itself become an obstacle to defusing the crisis, prolonging the mortal danger. In deterrence theory, the key word is “marginal”. When done “right”, there is no marginal advantage and therefore the temptation to get in the first blow is easily resisted. The chief danger of nuclear arms racing is that one or the other side might delude itself into thinking it has achieved a marginal advantage.

If the crisis reaches the stage of conventional armed conflict, dangers are further compounded if the option of nuclear escalation is retained by either or both sides. One might think that deterrence would preclude such an option since it envisions a circumstance in which deterrence has failed. This is correct when one talks solely of nuclear deterrence. But within a broader version of deterrence, this is not considered a failure. What is this broader version? The deterrence of major conflict. In this framework, the option of escalation from conventional to nuclear combat is meant not primarily to be implemented, but to deter initiation of major conventional combat in the first place. The credibility of this threat hinges on avowing with conviction that such escalation does not make all out nuclear war inevitable, i.e. nuclear deterrence has not totally failed.

Advocates of this (supposed avowed) belief, say that without this extension/modification of deterrence, the world is made “safe” for conventional war. Of course, safe or unsafe conventional war occurs. This means that there must be some threshold at which the theory of limited nuclear war would actually be put into practice. What is that threshold? Some think it clever not to specify it too clearly – “Keep the adversary guessing.” The one “advantage” of this approach is that, no matter how intense the conventional combat becomes, you can always say it did not exceed your threshold, i.e. your bluff wasn’t called. The disadvantage is that the adversary might go (perhaps without actually realizing it) so far as to make it politically impossible to back down. A humane leader might at that point resign in “disgrace” (one might say this was Khrushchev’s fate), a lesser leader might escalate rather than lose face. In the heat of combat, how many would refuse to carry out his orders?

Even if the threshold for triggering escalation is sharply defined, it is not at all clear that in the fog of war, either side would be clear on whether it had been violated. The adversary may have inadvertently caused greater damage than intended; the potential ‘escalator’ may have evaluated the damage as greater than it actually was. In either case (or if combined), escalation would be called for.

Once nuclear escalation occurs, what next? By strict nuclear deterrence or more general deterrence doctrine, the enemy must respond. There is the possibility that the enemy will back off, but that is NOT part of the deterrence framework*. If the retaliation is a tit-for-tat response, then it is within the realm of possibility that nuclear combat would end then and there, but there is no guarantee that the conventional combat would also end. Which begs the question: what did the escalation achieve aside from a lot more death and destruction? In short, threatening nuclear escalation while admitting that a tit-for-tat response is good enough to stop that line of attack, completely undermines the credibility of the threat. No, the threat has to be that any retaliation will be met with further escalation.

This corollary of nuclear escalation, is in fact one of the main drivers of nuclear arms racing. The need for “escalation dominance” at every “step of the escalation ladder” not only requires a vast array of nuclear warhead types, delivery systems, and deployments, but also greater numbers. If the adversary is drawn into competition, ending the race becomes very difficult. The logical extension of arms control is that nuclear escalation itself should be banned. The fundamental failure of Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev when they jointly endorsed the truism that “a nuclear war cannot be won, and must never be fought” is that, contrary to all logic, they left in place nuclear escalation options. So, while some good has come of arms control, its full potential could not be realized and what little good it has done is now in jeopardy. In retrospect, this was predictable.

While there is no proper way of setting and observing a conventional threshold, fortunately that is not the case with nuclear thresholds. Perhaps nothing in the world is more clear-cut than a nuclear explosion. Even the leaders of Imperial Japan knew immediately that Hiroshima had been hit by a nuclear weapon. The gap between the energy releases from chemical chain reactions and nuclear chain reactions is huge. Granted technological developments have somewhat closed that gap from either end. Any commitment to not initiating nuclear war should include a commitment to not close this gap any further. (No bigger mother-of-bombs and no very low yield nukes.)

Note that the workable threshold hinges on actual detonation. Launch on warning is incompatible with a renunciation of first use. Why? The warning may be incorrect. The warning might be the product of computer hacking. The missiles may not carry nuclear warheads. The nuclear warheads may not detonate. The slim possibility of any of these being the case would make “retaliation” a catastrophic mistake, as it would almost certainly trigger a true retaliation. Or the attack may, genuinely, have been

unauthorized or accidental, in which case, retaliation might not be the most appropriate response** (if it ever is).

The next point to consider is the difference between unilateral and universal renunciation of initiating nuclear war. With unilateral renunciation, how to respond to the initiation of nuclear war by the adversary has to be addressed. There are various ways this can be done. India has declared that any use of nuclear weapons by Pakistan would trigger an all-out nuclear retaliation. This avoids getting drawn into the nuclear-escalation-ladder game, but some question its credibility. China policy does not seem so cut and dry. But the point is that the full disarmament potential of never-starting-nuclear-war policy is hampered by the possibility of others starting nuclear war.

Once never-starting-nuclear-war become a universal (or very nearly-universal) policy of nuclear armed states, confidence building measures become feasible within the deterrence framework. Weapons can, by multilateral agreement with verification and monitoring, be removed from forward deployment and alert status. The role of nuclear weapons in security affairs will diminish greatly. Once arrangements for the total elimination of nuclear weapons and the prevention of their re-acquisition have been properly worked out, a nuclear weapon free world becomes the next logical step.

Indeed, nothing would go further to reviving faith in the nuclear-weapon states' good-faith compliance with the disarmament obligation of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's Article VI than the adoption of never-start-nuclear-war by them. This is no small side benefit since holding the line on proliferation is also an important part of avoiding nuclear war and achieving a nuclear weapon free world.

We recommend that, at the 2020 Review Conference, the States Parties endorse the unconditional renunciation by the nuclear-weapon States of any and all threats and plans to initiate nuclear war, if they have not already done so. Non-nuclear-weapon states that are militarily allied to nuclear-weapon states should renounce the initiation of nuclear war as an acceptable means of their defense. Such renunciations should be achieved no later than 2025, and each meeting of the Preparatory Committee should be used to track progress toward this goal. Nuclear armed states not parties to the NPT should be pressed by all States Parties to also renounce initiation of nuclear war, if they have not already done so.

* A minor power doesn't actually need the capacity for massive retaliation. One nuclear weapon detonated high above the atmosphere can cause an electromagnetic pulse that would, in an instant, hobble a major power, possibly killing millions in the ensuing months without electricity and the Internet. That President Trump changed his belligerent tone after North Korea acquired both a long-range missile and a fusion bomb may well be due to this new reality that confronted him.

** We are assuming here and throughout that the adversary is nuclear armed. Obvious a non-nuclear adversary cannot respond in kind. The folly of using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon possessors is a topic for another occasion.

*** Without Launch on Warning, the case for basing nuclear weapons on vulnerable launch platforms collapses. If there is a return to nuclear deterrence proper, the emphasis shifts to having nuclear systems that can survive with high probability any attempt at preemption. Either systems need to be inherently invulnerable, such as submarines, or they can be scramble into an invulnerable mode on short notice, such as aircraft. Likewise the command and control system has to be invulnerable. (Ideally to the point that there is no need to pre-delegate authority to counter-attack.)