What Would Nuclear Abolition Look Like?

Bruce D. Larkin

We are seated, in a very large examination hall, with hundreds of other students. Our assignment is to imagine ‘nuclear abolition’. As we look at our exam paper, we realize that ‘nuclear abolition’ could be either the process by which abolition is brought about, or the end result, a world which had abolished nuclear weapons. These are different problems, because they begin from quite distinct initial conditions.

Assume that it’s the process we’re to survey. Which process? The [i] most likely, or [ii] most desirable, or [iii] best in assuring against nuclear war, or use of nuclear weapons, taking place before abolition is achieved? Or is it [iv] the several which are more likely than others, that is, those among which the actual outcome will probably be found?

What conditions are nuclear weapon states likely to seek? To require? If nuclear abolition is the result of a complex negotiation, what tradeoffs will the states—nuclear and non-nuclear states—endeavor to win?

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Process

But perhaps this exam question isn’t so hard after all. I could start my paper by saying that achieving abolition is a simple problem, because of one political fact, one scientific fact, and a compelling engine. The political fact is that each nuclear weapon state must come to agree that global abolition is in its interest. The scientific fact is that sources of significant quantities of fissile material are, at a first approximation, known and controllable. The engine, which
could drive governments and citizens to commit to finding and following a path to nuclear abolition, is that any states’ having nuclear weapons is **profoundly dangerous** to each of them.

To abolish nuclear weapons the world will need to forge an **adequate consensus among the governments of nuclear weapon states** that

[1] the risks and uncertainties under denuclearization are significantly less, and more tractable, than the risks and uncertainties inherent in nuclearism, and that

[2] the risks inherent in nuclearism are not tolerable.

Note, above all, that both the present world and the future world are assumed to be worlds of risk. That’s important because it means the challenge “it’s too risky to give up nuclear weapons” can be dismissed … unless the challenger can show that denuclearization is riskier than the **status quo**.

Of course, if the risks in a nuclear world were small, were ‘tolerable’, then we might be persuaded to shrug our shoulders and move on to higher priorities. I don’t believe they are tolerable. But the issue is not what I believe. The question is: in a modern polity, where does responsibility lie to justify mounting and deploying extraordinary destructive power? The answer is quite clear: its advocates must make a persuasive case. Those who advocate continued reliance on nuclear weapons **bear the burden of proof** to show that the risks they impose—on their citizens and all others— are ‘tolerable’.

And in my view, that is a responsibility that nuclearists studiously avoid. They do not want the risks of nuclearism to be aired, to be acknowledged, to be on the agenda of public discussion.

Significantly, **governments** are not in the same position as nuclearists. Nuclearists, asked by previous governments to develop, maintain, and deploy nuclear weapons, have come to advocate for nuclear weapons as instruments of state security and advantage. Governments, on the other hand, have to ask ‘how can we best maintain the security of our citizens?’ and the corresponding question ‘if deterrence failed and nuclear weapons were used against our people, would we have the capacity to restore a decent society?’ It is perfectly possible, and in fact is what

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we should anticipate, that we would find in any given country—China, the United States, Israel—both nuclearists assuming nuclear weapons serve the national interest and a government of officials concluding that nuclear weapons profoundly threaten the national interest. No doubt nuclearists would be joined by some political factions, some members of every political faction, by members of government, by strong voices in civil society, but if the government concluded against nuclearism, and were adequately supported in political factions and civil society, the State could negotiate with other States to bring about nuclear abolition. This opening into the problem of ‘nuclear abolition’ suggests what the process of nuclear abolition could look like.

Of What Would a ‘Process of Nuclear Abolition’ Consist in the Coming Year?

I could read the exam question to mean ‘what should States do in the coming year?’ and ‘what should activists press States to do in the coming year?’

Imagine that ‘the coming year’ is 2009 and that this exam is given before Barack Obama’s inauguration on January 20th. I will divide my exam paper into two parts, one focused on nuclear-weapon states and the other on non-nuclear-weapon states.

Part I. Nuclear-Weapon States

Three key steps can and should be taken in 2009: (i) unilateral calls for a forum and a concise statement of the objective, (ii) initiating the forum, and (iii) completing the ‘statement of aims’.

At the best, each nuclear-weapon state, both those ‘recognized’ in the NPT and those not, would declare to the others that it favored instituting the forum and each country’s stating its initial understanding of the aims.

Preliminary to the ‘forum’ I would recommend each nuclear-weapon state designate an officer ready to meet daily with counterparty officers in a convenient city, to ensure that there can be prompt exchanges and acknowledgments among the nine.

The forum would grow out of these officers’ preparations. It would be focused on content. Here one Ambassador could ask another, ‘must the first step be to ask whether we believe having nuclear weapons makes our country more safe?’ Or should it be:
‘assume we agree nuclear weapons make us less safe, how can we abolish them?’ An Ambassador could put the question to colleagues this way: ‘what would you require of an abolition world to judge that it would be safer than the status quo?’

The point is to have one fixed locus, attended by senior Ambassadors with access to and direction from their heads of government, to give ‘defining’ and ‘solving’ the path forward their undivided attention.

A ‘statement of aims’ need not come out of a vacuum. The forum could go back to Resolution 1 of the United Nations General Assembly, meeting on 24 January 1946. It created an Atomic Energy Commission mandated to ‘deal with the problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy and other related matters’ and included among its Terms of Reference that the Commission should make “specific proposals”

5. (c) for the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction;
5. (d) for effective safeguards by way of inspection and other means to protect complying States against the hazards of violations and evasions.

Part II. Non-Nuclear-Weapon States

The drafters of the NPT (1968) struck a dual bargain. First, states without nuclear weapons would forego them, and those with them would give them up. Second, all states could exploit nuclear insights for peaceful purposes. In doing so, they adopted views on scientific exchange and ‘peaceful purposes’ already explicit in UNGA Resolution 1 (1946).

In an effective abolition world all states—including non-nuclear-weapon states—are freed from the possibility of being attacked with nuclear weapons, or suffering other effects of their use (such as radioactive fallout). But that is not the only security contingency which governments of non-nuclear-weapon states must consider. Many are participants in alliances, or understandings, that they would receive armed help if attacked by states using ‘conventional’ means. Their guarantors are, in some cases, nuclear-armed states which offered their guarantees from the high ground of nuclear forces in readiness. Would they make
analogous guarantees in a denuclearized world? Would their ‘conventional’ guarantees be credible?

Moreover, all states in an abolition world share concern that abolition be and remain effective, that no violation upset their security.

These considerations argue for forums among non-nuclear-weapon states, and among ‘allies’, analogous to those among the nuclear Powers. The questions Ambassadors could address to one another would be variations on those which Ambassadors of the nuclear-weapons states would pose. Their purpose, too, would be to come to an aim, or a panel of aims, offered as the purpose of negotiating abolition. Note that not all states need to have the same objectives.

Some non-nuclear-weapon states are committed to the policy of calling on the nuclear Powers to meet their NPT Article VI obligations. These governments have already given thought to the relationship of abolition to their vital interests. Their caucusing among UN members in the First Committee and the General Assembly suggest the political initiatives they could take vis-à-vis their peers.

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A reminder: 2009 should yield a clearly-stated aim. In addition, forums should address the question ‘how do we pursue this aim?’ A hint: obstacles [objections, fears, uncertainties, ‘red lines’, declared interests] should be explained and put in a soluble form. And a suggestion: keep texts simple and direct.

An obstacle is soluble when there are identified responsive measures that others could take, or would be willing to see the objector take, that dampen or resolve the obstacle. A certain burden lies on the objector to find and state how the objection could be resolved. As a matter of praxis, of course, agreement is more likely if the ‘responsive measures’ do not themselves provoke significant new dispute.

**End State**

On to the ZNW world. Assume that nuclear abolition had been negotiated and effected. There had been a global agreement to
declare all nuclear weapons and destroy them. Other measures worked against anyone’s making new nuclear weapons.

What would this ZNW world look like? These would be the most significant characteristics of an abolition world:

- the norm ‘no nuclear weapons’ would be universally accepted
- there would be an elaborate fabric of inquiry, surveillance, and accounting to detect any step to build a nuclear weapon
- an acknowledged Assurance would be chartered to determine whether a weapon program or preliminaries to a weapon program were being undertaken, and then what steps—including use of force—were required to maintain the ‘no nuclear weapons’ norm
- the Assurance could command a set of institutions to take measures short of force …
- and armed capabilities to implement Assurance decisions if force were judged necessary.

It’s evident that sustaining an effective ‘no nuclear weapons’ norm would pose ongoing political demands. And it would not be easy.

Just as getting to zero will require states’ believing that it is in their interest to do so, so the social, economic, and security collaterals to maintaining ZNW will need to nurture an ongoing belief that interest is served. That belief must be ‘adequately persuasive’ to keep the state committed to ZNW.

We could put it another way: that a ‘no nuclear weapons security community’ requires ongoing cultural commitments. These could include, for example,

- restraint, in relations with other states
- practices of pacific settlement of disputes
- collective practices, and preparations, for crisis avoidance
- in case of suspicion of forbidden activity, commitment to the ‘satisfaction rule’

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• openness and accountability
• ongoing ‘mutual reassurance’ practices

Each of these positions could be applied, as well, to disputes which risk ‘conventional war’. To what extent states would continue to create armed forces, and how they would understand the ‘right of self-defense’ and ‘legitimate’ use of force, will shape the context in which ZNW is practiced. Breakdown of negotiated resolution of differences, and resort instead to threats and force, would spawn arguments for returning nuclear options to each state’s judgment and control. On the other hand, the more successful pacific methods proved to be, the more likely that a ZNW regime would strengthen with time.

What Would This End State ‘Look Like’?

Our examination paper could begin by identifying four tasks which this end state would require:

• sustaining the political authority of the Assurancy
• searching for violation
• managing suspicion of violations
• guaranteeing that civil-sector nuclear energy activities did not spill fissile material into any uncontrolled political space

Of course, these requirements are very much like those we see in today’s nuclear non-proliferation world, with the IAEA taking the role of an Assurancy; the search for and management of violations is undertaken by states sometimes by themselves and sometimes through the IAEA. The IAEA's pre-INFCIRC/540 role focused largely on watching fissile material flow into civil-sector reactors and nuclear waste, incorporating fissile material, flow out. If it had

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evidence that fissile material could be being diverted to a military program, the IAEA could raise the alarm.

Similarly, the obverse side of the coin of ‘non-proliferation’ is ‘universality’. A challenge to the Assurancy’s authority, then, would question the norm’s universal acceptance. How could any such challenge be prevented? And what could be done if such a challenge seemed to be emerging? We can speculate on what grounds such a challenge could be made. It could take the form of

- a claim that ZNW was breaking down: for example, that a state or group was engaged in a nuclear program that the Assurancy was failing to halt

- a claim that the transition to ZNW had been significantly imperfect: for example, that a nuclear weapon state had held back nuclear weapons or fissile material

- a claim that the state could not maintain security against conventional challenges: that ZNW had exposed it to unacceptable vulnerability

- a claim that the instruments of ZNW were unacceptably intrusive: for example, a charge that the Assurancy’s powers to conduct inquiries and inspections were being misused to give some advantage—military, economic—to some state or states to the disadvantage of others

Centrality of Politics

Another way to compose our examination paper would turn on this proposition: that future ‘nuclear disarmament’ will be the subject of an ongoing and often intense politics, both within and among states, that cannot be described in advance.

This approach argues that if governments believe nuclear abolition is an important global accomplishment then the practical agreement to maintain ZNW will be forthcoming. Satisfaction of requirements for ZNW will flow from that agreement. But if governments doubt that a ZNW world is better than a world in which the nuclear option exists, then neither legalist nor technical arguments will enable effective ZNW. Instead, governments will

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deny the Assurancy resources and access, and may test the limits of the ZNW agreement.

The late Wolfgang Panofsky said that it was natural for the United States and Soviet Union, during the Cold War, to test their arms control agreements by taking actions exploring ambiguities, sometimes approaching that which was prohibited. The reaction of the other party signaled just what it understood the treaty to mean. Their mutual moves were then part of what Thomas Schelling termed “tacit bargaining.”

I’ve observed elsewhere1 that negotiation is the defining activity of politics, properly understood. All elements of a nuclear abolition regime will have been subject to negotiation, and will remain the subjects of negotiation once an agreement and Assurancy are in place. Facts will be disputed. Charges will be made and require assessment. Civil-sector nuclear activities will prompt suspicions. Interdependency of steps taken by the parties — ‘sequencing’ — may spawn disputes questioning others’ ‘good faith’. Only ongoing negotiation will sustain the regime.

From this vantage, ‘nuclear abolition’ will appear incomplete, uncertain, even fragile. Just as the contemporary Non-Proliferation Regime is seen as a Swiss cheese of inadequacies, non-participations, concealed intent, tolerated violations, postponed commitments, evasions, ambiguities and loopholes, so it is likely that a ZNW regime will also lay itself open to criticism that it is unsound and unreliable.

But if challenge to the abolition regime approaches crisis, Powers will be compelled to judge whether their security is better-served by abolition or, abandoning abolition, unrestrained self-help. Incentives to join in enforcing the abolition regime will be clearer than ever before. No one can say in advance, ignorant of the specific circumstances and the actor governments of the time, whether those incentives will prove great enough to sustain effective enforcement, but there will have been much prior ‘strategic’ thought about action at the brink of such a crisis. Polities stand and fall by their capacities, and their readiness to act jointly, at just such moments.

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1 War Stories (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001).

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And If the Assumption of Good Faith Negotiation to a Common Purpose is Wrong?

Now we come to the last part of our exam. We open the examination paper. It says: “And if the assumption of good faith negotiation to a common purpose is wrong? what then?”

My first reaction is to reject the premise. What is proposed, I would insist, is realistic and pragmatic. It turns on a demonstrable flaw in the ‘logic of deterrence’. Even if some nuclear powers were to begin with every intention of retaining their nuclear capacity, I believe they could be persuaded that doing so opens them to such grave danger that they should seek security in abolition. I do not assume that every nuclear state will enter a good faith negotiation centered on the common purpose of nuclear weapons abolition at the onset, but I believe it is possible all can be drawn to that purpose, that they can be won to a new, non-nuclear security system that recognizes their fears and uncertainties and offers practical assurances for future security.

In this view, the process of nuclear abolition would be fraught, troubled, unpromising, and beset by states’ seeking advantage at the expense—or greater insecurity—of others. To imagine otherwise would indeed be naïve and merely wishful.

A quick glance around the world, as 2008 comes to an end, illustrates how resistance to nuclear zero could manifest itself. Consider three nuclear weapon states. The United States is only now approaching the end of eight years of ‘we first’ policies that assumed long-term retention of nuclear weapons and claimed a right to undertake unilateral ‘preventive war’, without restraint. Israel, not admitting to have nuclear weapons but justifying use of military force as necessary to ‘self defense’, is in the throes of a new war against Hamas in Gaza, reproducing its 2006 war against Hezbollah in Lebanon. In this case, however, it is ‘preventive war’ against a segment of the populations Israel holds in the concentration camps of Gaza and the West Bank. And a recent account of Russian resistance to an exposé of a 1957 nuclear accident suggests how difficult it would be to persuade a Russian

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government that transparency, not continued secrecy, would best contribute to Russian nuclear security. Governments of these three countries could adopt the common purpose of achieving nuclear zero—Barack Obama is on record that “Here’s what I’ll say as President: America seeks a world in which there are no nuclear weapons”—but only in the face of deep-rooted nuclearism.

**A Short List of Immediate Steps**

Now I put aside the fiction that we are in a University examination hall, writing our exams. Instead, we are responsible government officials at the highest level. If it were within my authority, I would begin 2009 by doing the following:

- establish an ‘abolition officer’ in an appropriate place within my government, and ensure he or she had adequate staff and authority.

- in discreet diplomatic conversations, request peer governments to do the same, and to anticipate initiatives from our ‘abolition officer’; and indicate readiness of our ‘abolition officer’ to receive correspondence from peers.

- declare in highest-level conversations and by purposive letters to other governments my wish to see a global initiative centered on achieving, within a ‘very few years’, nuclear weapon abolition with appropriate safeguards.

- if mine were a nuclear-weapon state, invite my peer nuclear Powers to take part in an ongoing Forum of the type described above …

- … and as a first step suggest that aims 5(c) and 5(d) of the January 1946 UNGA Resolution 1 are a sufficient statement of general purposes, to which the Forum should draft appropriate ‘specific proposals’.

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• if mine were a non-nuclear-weapon state, … [as above]

• declare to my peer nuclear Powers readiness to undertake a complete accounting of nuclear warheads and fissile material in the history of our national nuclear program to the present, and to establish sharing of that data and joint means of verifying and correcting such information with any other peer or peers prepared to reciprocate.

• instruct my military to prepare contingency plans and design a force structure suited to (i) security during a speedy transition to nuclear zero and (ii) security given global nuclear zero.

• establish an interagency institute to model and simulate verification and decision processes under nuclear zero; and propose some joint modeling and simulation with other Powers.

That would be enough for starters.
Abbreviations

IAEA  International Atomic Energy Agency
INFCIRC  an IAEA Information Circular
NPT  Non-Proliferation Treaty [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons]
UN  United Nations
UNGA  United Nations General Assembly
ZNW  Zero Nuclear Weapons

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