Chapter 4

Minimizing the Danger of Nuclear Weapons

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ABSTRACT

Many of those concerned about global peace advocate a policy of nuclear disarmament in order to eliminate the danger posed by these weapons. The logic is that eliminating the weapons would eliminate the danger they pose. But I argue that these are separate goals, that eliminating the weapons would not eliminate the danger, and in fact might make it worse. After the cold war, many thought that it was finally possible to rid the world of nuclear weapons, but since 1991, the world has not moved substantially towards this goal. The reason is that nuclear weapons create a security dilemma in which efforts to use them to make societies safer, through the practice of nuclear deterrence, end up making them less safe. This is because efforts (through minimum deterrence) to use them to avoid a deliberate nuclear attack create risk of nuclear war by escalation, and efforts (through counterforce deterrence) to minimize the risk of nuclear war by escalation, create the risk of deliberate nuclear attack. The way out of this dilemma is through delegitimization of nuclear weapons.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the anti-nuclear weapons movement is often stated as the elimination of nuclear weapons, achieving “global zero,” and much discussion has gone into considering the best process or set of steps necessary to achieve this result (Kelleher & Reppy, 2012). But is this in fact the goal we should be pursuing? The problem with nuclear weapons is the danger they pose to the lives of millions of individuals and whole societies. This suggests that the goal should be, more precisely, to eliminate the danger posed by nuclear weapons. These two goals, eliminating nuclear weapons and eliminating the danger posed by nuclear weapons, may seem to come to the same thing, but they are in fact distinct. My claim in this paper is that an appreciation of the problems posed by freeing the world of the nuclear danger lies in an understanding of the difference between these two goals.

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To see the nature of these problems, consider the idea of a glide path to nuclear disarmament. The idea is that we can escape the danger posed by nuclear weapons by decreasing our emphasis on nuclear threats as part of a steady and gradual process of nuclear disarmament. The U.S. Catholic Bishop Conference in its influential 1983 Pastoral Letter, “The Challenge of Peace” advocated such a glide path (U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983). The bishops proposed that the only morally justifiable form of nuclear deterrence policy would be one designed to sharply decrease an emphasis on nuclear threats through a process that would eventually achieve nuclear disarmament. For this purpose, the bishops advocated a nuclear policy that included such measures as:

- Mutual arms reductions;
- A comprehensive test ban treaty;
- Increasing the width of the “firebreak” (or obstacle) to the escalation from conventional war to nuclear war;
- Strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation treaty;
- Other means of reducing tensions and decreasing the role of nuclear weapons in security policy.

In short, they believed that there was a glide path to eliminating nuclear weapons and that nuclear deterrence was morally justifiable only if nuclear policy stuck to such a path.

The bishops advocated a policy of minimum deterrence and were especially opposed to counterforce deterrence. Understanding this difference is important to understanding how we might achieve the goal of eliminating or minimizing the danger of nuclear weapons. Minimum deterrence involves a relatively small number of nuclear warheads deployed so as to provide a second-strike capacity, that is, a capacity to destroy the society of the adversary even after a large surprise nuclear attack. This capacity is known as assured destruction, and when the adversary has a similar capacity, as the U.S. and Russia did and do, the situation is known as mutual assured destruction (MAD). In contrast, counterforce deterrence involves extensive nuclear threats to destroy military targets, and seeks to provide the state with an ability to fight a limited nuclear war. The bishops opposed counterforce deterrence because a wide-spread policy of counterforce threats would both increase the reliance on nuclear threats and, in their view, increase the risk of nuclear war (Lee, 1993).

But in the thirty plus years since the bishops’ letter, the nuclear states have not been on a glide path to nuclear disarmament. Despite the optimism generated by the end of the cold war, the counterforce features of U.S. nuclear policy have been retained and in some cases increased, leading to an even greater emphasis on nuclear threats. Note a few examples:

- Despite the end of the cold war, many of the nuclear warheads of the superpowers remain on “hair trigger” or high-alert status.
- There has been a continuing reliance on the threat of the first use of nuclear weapons to deter both nuclear and non-nuclear threats.
- Specifically, the U.S. has added a nuclear first-use policy of “calculated ambiguity,” involving a vague threat to retaliate with nuclear weapons in response to a less-than-nuclear attack, which increases the reliance on nuclear threats by extending them into new areas.
- The U.S has engaged in a policy of nuclear modernization, including the development of new forms of nuclear weapons, such as “bunker busters.”