

Realism, Idealism, Deterrence, and Disarmament

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Abstract

The general concepts of idealism and realism appear to have captured truths about what should be and what is, respectively. The idealist's contemporary focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war surely is valid: the risks to humanity of the employment of nuclear weapons are simply so extreme in so many scenarios that nuclear war must be prevented. However, the contention that nuclear disarmament is the answer—and correspondingly nuclear deterrence must be demoted—presumes that the cooperative transformation of the interstate system necessary for disarmament is likely within a meaningful timeframe. Yet degrading nuclear deterrence now in favor of transformation and disarmament risks “waiting for Godot” because also valid is the realist's basic contention that the timely transformation of the interstate system needed for cooperative global nuclear disarmament appears implausible in the extreme. The apparent tranquility of the immediate post-Cold War period that led many to optimism in this regard no longer exists, and the premature demotion of nuclear deterrence could unintentionally precipitate its failure.

In 1962 renowned realist academic Hans Morgenthau observed that “the history of modern political thought is the story of a contest between two schools that differ fundamentally in their conceptions of the nature of man, society, and politics.”¹ Arnold Wolfers, another highly regarded twentieth-century political theorist noted similarly, “In international relations, two opposing schools of thought have fought each other throughout the modern age. Ever since Machiavelli published *The Prince*, his ‘realistic’ views have shocked ‘idealist’ thinkers. . . . Today, more than ever Ameri-

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can statesmen and the American public find themselves torn between the conflicting pulls of idealist and realist thought.”² Decades later, at the beginning of the new millennium, the same point held true. The study of international relations “can be reduced to two broad, internally rich and competing conceptions of the subject: idealism and realism.”³ The two concepts “are fundamentally at odds with one another, and cannot be reconciled in theory or practice. . . . The clash between idealists and realists is an ontological foundation predicated on conflicting assessments of human nature and the possibilities for, and appropriate conceptions of, progress in international relations.”⁴ This conceptual debate extends to nuclear weapons, deterrence, and disarmament.

A well-developed nuclear disarmament narrative contends that disarmament is a matter of existential importance because individual state deployment of nuclear arsenals poses an extreme and immediate risk to humanity: “All nuclear weapons are a humanitarian threat . . . designed to lay waste to cities and indiscriminately mass murder civilians.”⁵ Consequently, this narrative concludes with the corresponding policy prescription that the pursuit of complete nuclear disarmament should be the US policy priority and, indeed, the priority goal of all states in the international system.⁶

This disarmament narrative acknowledges the reality that international threats can drive national leaders’ felt need for nuclear weapons to help address their respective security concerns. However, this reality does not justify the continued pursuit or maintenance of national nuclear capabilities: “They do not diminish the necessity of disarmament. Acknowledgement of fundamental security realities makes nuclear disarmament more, not less, urgent.”⁷

The disarmament narrative’s contention is that the continued existence of nuclear weapons now poses a greater security risk to states than would their voluntary nuclear disarmament. Indeed, the risk posed by the existence of nuclear arsenals is unprecedented and should establish the dynamic for the equally unprecedented level of interstate cooperation necessary for nuclear disarmament: the need to address the nuclear risk should overshadow other national security fears and drive the level of interstate cooperation needed for disarmament.

Idealists see the inherent dangers of an anarchic international system. They focus on the priority goal of transforming the system to achieve a cooperative order that reliably facilitates the peaceful resolution of interstate conflicts. Idealists deem this transformation goal to be feasible if national leaders will follow reason and enlightened self-interest. For idealists, all reasonable parties should share this goal. Their belief is that such trans-

formation would ease or eliminate the harsh security concerns otherwise imposed on states by the anarchic structure of the existing international system. Further, it would alleviate the corresponding need for states to prioritize power and position over more noble and cooperative callings.

In contrast, for many realists, interstate conflicts of interest and the potential for aggression are constants inherent in an anarchic, “self-help” international system: “With each state judging its grievances and ambitions according to the dictates of its own reason or desire—conflict, sometimes leading to war, is bound to occur.”⁸ Interstate cooperation cannot be assumed, and no authority exists with the power and will to reliably enforce norms or prevent aggression. Consequently, while there are points of cooperation among states, individual states ultimately are responsible for their own survival because no other reliable mechanism is in place to protect them. Thus, the pursuit of national power for self-preservation is a reasonable and prudent national priority.

Whereas realists see states as compelled to pursue power and position given the unavoidable potential for conflict and aggression in an anarchic international system, idealists see the potential for its profound transformation to a more cooperative and peaceful order. The latter would allow states to reduce or even eliminate the pursuit of national power and position as the priority. Realism and idealism provide contrary starting points about the nature of international politics that lead to equally contrary analyses and conclusions about national leadership best practices. Indeed, the eminent scholars and statesmen of each philosophy often see precisely the same set of international circumstances yet draw wholly contradictory conclusions about their meaning and the most reasonable courses of action.

That these two competing schools of thought differ is nowhere more apparent than in debates about nuclear weapons, particularly nuclear disarmament. But the significance of idealism and realism to the nuclear debate is rarely part of the discussion.⁹ This general lack of recognition or acknowledgement of the idealist or realist connection to competing nuclear narratives obscures an understanding of the assumptions, logic, strengths, and weaknesses of those narratives. Competing narratives about nuclear deterrence and disarmament that ignore their idealist or realist roots will miss much of the story and likely lead to conclusions that are significantly uninformed. The goal here is not to review all the academic variations and nuances of idealism and realism. Rather it is to identify the connections of competing nuclear narratives to general idealist and realist thought and, by doing so, help provide a deeper understanding of those narratives and a more complete framework for considering them.

Idealist Thought and Nuclear Disarmament

Idealism often is the explicit or implicit philosophical position underlying the nuclear disarmament narrative. It essentially contends that the prevailing international system of independent and often conflicting states can be transformed via concerted, cooperative international efforts to such a degree that individual states ultimately will no longer feel compelled to, or need to, maintain independent nuclear arsenals. The felt need to maintain nuclear weapons can be relieved by developing alternative global security mechanisms and antinuclear norms that advance and codify the common desire to eliminate nuclear weapons and the risks they pose to all humanity. Given this threat, it is in each state's enlightened self-interest to take these actions cooperatively.

This disarmament narrative—in common with idealist thought in general—places considerable emphasis on the transformative power of reason, enlightened self-interest and the instruments of collective or “cooperative” security, international institutions, laws, and norms. These are the mechanisms that have the potential to transform the international system.¹⁰ The rudiments of these mechanisms and corresponding transition purportedly are already visible in the rise of international institutions, the decline of interstate wars and combat deaths over decades, the workings of the United Nations, the enactment of multilateral arms control agreements, and the spread of democratic governments.¹¹

The expressed need for such a transformation and belief in its practical feasibility are reflected in President Obama's well-crafted and idealist-oriented 2016 speech to the United Nations. He offers the promise that leaders of good will can transform the international system.

We are all stakeholders in this international system, and it calls upon us to invest in the success of [international] institutions to which we belong. . . .

. . . . I recognize history tells a different story than the one that I've talked about here today. There is a darker and more cynical view of history that we can adopt. . . .

. . . . We have to remember that the choices of individual human beings led to repeated world war. But we also have to remember that the choices of individual human beings created a United Nations, so that a war like that would never happen again. Each of us as leaders, each nation can choose to reject those who appeal to our worst impulses and embrace those who appeal to our best. For we have shown that we can choose a better history.¹²

Idealists have pointed to different modes and paths for this transformation but typically suggest that the dynamic for its realization will be a common, reasoned response to the obvious need to establish a more peaceful and secure order. As a highly regarded mid-twentieth-century historian, E. H. Carr describes this dynamic: “Reason could demonstrate the absurdity of the international anarchy; and with increasing knowledge, enough people would be rationally convinced of its absurdity to put an end to it.”¹³ Carr notes that the idealist drive to do so flourished in Western countries following the horrific slaughter of World War I. In particular, after that war, President Woodrow Wilson advanced the goal, logic, and arguments of idealism in his great efforts to establish the League of Nations—an international organization he intended to provide collective security for all states via the power of world public opinion, economic sanctions, and military force if necessary.¹⁴

The relationship between the prospects for disarmament and a cooperative international political order has long been recognized. A highly regarded 1941 academic study of international arms control efforts following World War I reaches this conclusion:¹⁵

Any diminution in the relative armament strength of a state means a proportionately diminished ability to carry its national policies through to what it regards as a successful conclusion. Conference delegates are determined to maintain and are disposed to increase, their nation’s armament power relative to that of other states; hence they scrutinize every scheme of reduction with minute care, and uncharitably search for the special motive prompting it proposal. Pervaded by this atmosphere of mutual distrust, disarmament gatherings are led to discuss the means of waging war under the name of peace.

... Evidently the [necessary] conditions of peace include not only the stable balance of power . . . but also a system of international law intolerant of violence, a desire for peace in the human population superior to all conflicting desires, and an organization of the world community adequate to restrain hostilities.

... The present epoch may be a period of transition in world history—transition from the exclusive pursuit of national interest, with war as an accepted instrument of national policy, to the cooperative establishment of the conditions of peace. But the latter goal is not yet in sight; it remains a period of transition.¹⁶

The well-known 1960 text by Grenville Clark and Louis Sohn, *World Peace through World Law*, lays out in great detail the legal framework and

requirements for an international organization with the authority and police power needed to enforce the general disarmament of all states and peaceful interstate relations—effectively transforming the international system by eliminating the national security concerns so central to realist thought.¹⁷ Their work presents the underlying principles and main features of such a transformed global collective security organization, with the hopeful prediction that by 1975 it would be “well on its way.”¹⁸

In 1983 the US Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter on nuclear weapons and deterrence. It concludes with a conditional endorsement of nuclear deterrence as a step en route to disarmament in a transformed international system: “There is a substitute for war. There is negotiation under the supervision of a global body realistically fashioned to do its job. It must be given the equipment to keep constant surveillance on the entire earth. Present technology makes this possible. . . . It must be empowered by all the nations to enforce its commands on every nation.”¹⁹

The contemporary disarmament narrative contends that the catalyst for a transformation is recognizing the potential for a global nuclear catastrophe. When leaders understand the severity of the common threat posed by the existence of nuclear weapons, they should be willing to engage in nuclear disarmament in their own enlightened self-interest. That is, the common threat posed by the existence of nuclear weapons can overcome national leaders’ felt need to sustain them for national security purposes and inspire the unprecedented interstate cooperation needed to transform the system and realize nuclear disarmament:

To reach nuclear zero it is necessary to achieve what Professor Jonathan Schell describes as political zero, a state of political relations among nations in which there is no desire or need to possess nuclear weapons, where tensions and animosities that lead nations to fear their neighbors have declined towards zero. Political zero does not mean that nations live in a world without conflicts; it only means the risks of conflict can be limited in a system where certain mechanisms exist to prevent them from escalating to dangerous levels.²⁰

Thus, the emphasis is on the transformation of the international system as necessary to enable global nuclear disarmament, and the fear of a global nuclear catastrophe is the catalyst that should drive that transformation. Because of the unprecedented severity of the common nuclear threat to all countries, the transformation of the international system needed for nuclear disarmament should be feasible with informed leaders behaving reasonably and with courage. Proponents of disarmament emphasize that

the national security fears driving the desire for nuclear capabilities may be overcome to enable nuclear disarmament via “strategic foresight and political courage”:²¹ “It is ideas . . . rather than technical problems, that present the most difficult barriers to reaching [nuclear] zero. These are problems that can be overcome. No law of nature stands in the way.”²²

This disarmament narrative recognizes that the cooperative international transformation needed has not occurred in history and would need to proceed incrementally. It further contends that given the common and unprecedented threat to all humanity posed by nuclear weapons, moving in this direction can proceed with broader recognition of that nuclear threat and the enlightened world leadership needed to implement the transformation.²³ This transformation can not only reduce or eliminate the felt security requirement of individual states for nuclear weapons and deterrence but also enable the common good of eliminating the risks these weapons pose to all states and peoples.

The initial process of disarming, driven by the global fear of nuclear weapons, can be a dynamic for the further cooperative transformation of the international system.²⁴ As a noted journalist has suggested, “Maybe this is how a new sort of world, with foundations planted in human solidarity and connectedness, will come into being. Maybe this is the true value of nuclear weapons: scare us into learning how to get along.”²⁵

Correspondingly, frequently expressed goals of the nuclear disarmament narrative include (1) globally promoting recognition of the inherent risks to all posed by nuclear weapons, and the consequent need for transforming international relations to enable their elimination; and (2) organizing political pressure on national leaders to move in this direction. There are many examples of this argument in action, including the relatively recent US official and popular advocacy of “nuclear zero”²⁶ and the contemporary UN-based Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons:²⁷ “International norms influence all states. . . . There must be a global embrace of the U.N.’s Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which sets these norms against nuclear weapons.”²⁸

President Obama endorsed the modern nuclear zero movement very publicly, with realist caveats, in his famous 2009 Prague speech.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, this nuclear disarmament initiative subsequently received an unparalleled level of favorable public and media attention. As Yale professor Paul Bracken observes, “Academics, think tanks and intellectuals quickly jumped on the bandwagon. For a time, it really looked like there was going to be an antinuclear turn in U.S. strategy.”³⁰

Also in 2009, then-director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed El Baradei, pointed to the need for an effective global collective security system to enable nuclear disarmament: “We need a return to a system rooted in effective multilateralism. The [United Nations] Security Council must be drastically reformed so the world can rely on it as the primary body for maintaining international peace and security, as foreseen in the UN Charter.”³¹ El Baradei’s point here nicely reflects the fundamentals of idealist thought as applied to the question of nuclear disarmament: when a global organization (in this case, the UN) is able to maintain “international peace and security” reliably, states in the system will no longer confront dominating security concerns and will, therefore, be free to disarm without fear.

Well before 2009, however, scholars of international relations suggested the viability of an idealist-oriented path for transforming the international system to achieve the goal of nuclear disarmament. For example,

if the roots of the nuclear problem lie in a pathological national-state system, then we need to do no more (and should do no less) than change that system. Some of the necessary changes have been recognized for a century or more. Foremost among them is strengthening international authority so that it can provide an effective system of security for all nations. . . . If citizens’ movements can force nations to follow through on creating an effective international security organization, they can pull the deadly fangs of the nation-state system.³²

The nuclear disarmament narrative often refers to national policies of nuclear deterrence as impeding progress toward nuclear disarmament and an unworthy, shortsighted rationale for sustaining nuclear weapons. A policy of nuclear deterrence is deemed an impediment because it suggests a positive, important value for nuclear weapons in contrast to the establishment of a global norm against them. Consequently, the argument for nuclear disarmament often includes a critique of nuclear deterrence (the primary justification for nuclear weapons) as being an unnecessary, unreliable, and accident-prone security strategy. The point is, were national leaders to set aside nuclear deterrence policies, there ostensibly would be little or no loss of national security because nuclear deterrence is unnecessary and/or unreliable. In return, countries would benefit from eliminating the risk of nuclear accidents and an easing of the way to global nuclear disarmament. This trade-off is the great net benefit of pursuing disarmament, and not deterrence, as the priority.

In short, advocates of nuclear disarmament often become critics of nuclear deterrence and present the prioritization of nuclear deterrence or nuclear disarmament policies as mutually exclusive choices, with the obvious conclusion that disarmament is the only sensible choice: “Nuclear deterrence comes with tremendous risks and costs. The arguments in favor of deterrence, if sometimes true, are not likely to be true in every case. What happens when it fails? . . . The growing risk of a catastrophic nuclear war outweighs the uncertain benefits of deterrence for the United States.”³³ Further, “nuclear deterrence is the heart of the nuclear believers’ case; it’s their indispensable idea, and without it, they have nothing. Nuclear deterrence is indefensible because 1) we don’t understand it, 2) it has failed in the past, and 3) it will inevitably fail in the future.”³⁴ Nuclear deterrence policies and weapons are a problem; the transformation of the international system and disarmament are the answer.

Realist Thought and Cooperative Global Transformation

Realist thought, while quite varied, is based on the proposition that the international system is an anarchic, “self-help” system because cooperation cannot be assumed and there is no overarching authority with sufficient power to regulate interstate behavior reliably and predictably.³⁵ Most importantly, no global organization exists that is capable of reliably preventing interstate aggression. Because conflicts of interest among states are inevitable, the absence of an overarching organization with authority and power leaves open the constant opportunity for aggression and war by any state so inclined. As Robert Jervis has noted, “For realists, world politics is a continuing if not an unrelenting struggle for survival, advantage, and often dominance.”³⁶ This is not to suggest that realism contends that there are no international institutions, laws, norms, or possible points of trust and cooperation. That these exist is self-evident. However, in an anarchic international system, as states encounter conflicts of interest, each state ultimately has the prerogative to decide its own course of action for good or ill; there is no international authority with sufficient unity of will and power to reliably enforce international laws and norms.

Individual states are also ultimately on their own for their protection from external threats. States seek power to provide for their own security but in doing so may drive the suspicions and fears of others concerned about their own relative power positions.³⁷ States seeking no more than their own security can drive other states’ perceptions of insecurity as each must be watchful of the other in a lawless system. Because the international system is anarchic and dangerous in this sense, each state must be

concerned about its power position relative to any other state that is, or might become, a security threat. As noted by the renowned realist scholar Kenneth Waltz, “States coexist in a condition of anarchy. Self-help is the principle of action in an anarchic order, and the most important way in which states must help themselves is by providing for their own security.”³⁸

Consequently, according to this realist axiom, in response to the condition of international anarchy each state has an overarching interest in its power position (defined as the capability to control others). Hans Morgenthau refers to this as “interest defined as power.”³⁹ In the international sphere, state leaders generally will, to the extent feasible, seek power in response to the threat levels they perceive or anticipate. Leaders generally also will subordinate, if necessary, other possible goals, such as adherence to international norms or legal standards, to the accumulation and use of power necessary to provide for national survival.

Realists generally contend that this is not an immoral, ignorant, or malicious approach to international relations. Rather, it is a reasonable and prudent response to the reality of an anarchic international system and the security concerns it imposes on virtually all states. Morgenthau explains in this regard that the standards by which national political leaders must judge their international behavior are different from those of the lawyer, moralist, or religious leader.⁴⁰ Political leaders must place national survival and the necessary tools of power for that survival as their priority goals, subordinating if necessary other possible national goals to this end—including adherence to international norms or legal codes. As famed Oxford history professor Sir Michael Howard remarked, “Those responsible for the conduct of state affairs see their first duty as being to ensure that their state survives; that it retains its power to protect its members and provide for them the conditions of a good life. For the individual, personal survival is not necessarily the highest duty. He may well feel called upon to sacrifice himself to his ideals, his family, or his friends. The state, or those responsible for it, cannot.”⁴¹

In short, national leaders do not have the prerogative to subordinate the goal of protecting those under their authority against foreign threats to other goals if doing so would threaten national survival. To do so would be to abdicate their most basic leadership responsibilities of protecting national survival in a dangerous international system. In contrast, the lawyer may see adherence to legal codes as the highest-priority goal, the moralist adherence to moral standards, and the religious leader adherence to religious standards.

The realist challenge confronting the idealist nuclear disarmament narrative is the contention that the cooperative transformation of the anarchic international system to one that is reliably cooperative and enables nuclear disarmament is implausible, if not impossible, in any anticipated timeframe. And, in the absence of such a transformation, some states will continue to ease their security concerns via the maintenance of nuclear capabilities for deterrence and/or coercive purposes. Initiatives that place policy priority on the US pursuit of nuclear disarmament over sustaining nuclear deterrence capabilities may be misguided and possibly dangerous because the underlying international transformation necessary for general nuclear disarmament simply is not plausible.

The central importance to the nuclear debate of these basic philosophical positions about what is and is not plausible is reflected in the 2009 final report of the bipartisan strategic nuclear posture commission (Perry-Schlesinger Commission). It states that “the conditions that might make possible the global elimination of nuclear weapons are not present today and their creation would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order.”⁴² Such a declaration is directly from the realist canon: only when international relations are transformed so that member states no longer confront security threats and no longer believe themselves “on their own” will they reasonably eliminate the capabilities they consider essential to their security. Nuclear disarmament could ultimately be a consequence of such a transformation, but disarmament cannot precede that transformation. Indeed, calling on states to disarm without the prior cooperative transformation of the anarchic interstate system is asking them to take imprudent risks with their own survival. States confronting existing or prospective security threats, particularly including nuclear threats, cannot reasonably be expected to accept such risks. Why? University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer offers the realist’s answer in stating, “Nuclear weapons are considered the ultimate deterrent for good reason: Adversaries are unlikely to threaten the existence of a nuclear-armed state.”⁴³ For the realist, nuclear weapons are a symptom of the enduring realities of the international system: conflicting interests, a continuing security dilemma, and the enduring possibility of interstate war. If these can be ameliorated or eliminated reliably via systemic change, then eliminating nuclear weapons could be an easy, even natural consequence. If not, then at least some states will continue to seek nuclear weapons, and as a consequence, others will see a need to do so as well.

Realist thought does not contend that states should or will reject all forms of arms control—there may be occasion for agreement that is in

each party's national interest. However, in general, in an anarchic, self-help system, states will not willingly part with those capabilities they consider essential to their security: "Simply stated, the world has yet to ban successfully any weapon deemed to be effective by those with the desire and the means to acquire it."⁴⁴ States will not willingly forego the capabilities they believe essential to their security on the hope or promise that cooperation will prevail and the threats they face will cease, or that their security needs will otherwise somehow be met. The prudent expectation must be that in a system that effectively remains lawless, a state's survival could ultimately depend on its own power. Such an expectation reasonably precludes a general willingness to forfeit necessary power in advance of the establishment of a reliable, enduring alternative security mechanism that eliminates national security concerns (i.e., a new international political order).⁴⁵ Consequently, many realists see arms control agreements as most feasible when they are least meaningful.

Reflecting this realist logic, in 1929 President Herbert Hoover observed, "Until such time as nations can build the agencies of pacific settlement on stronger foundations; until fear, the most dangerous of all national emotions, has been proved groundless by long proof of international honesty; until the power of world public opinion as a restraint of aggression has had many years of test, there will not have been established that confidence which warrants the abandonment of preparedness for defense among nations. To do so may invite war."⁴⁶

Critiquing the Narrative

Waltz's early realist critique of the idealist disarmament narrative reveals the divide separating realism and idealism and its effect on views regarding nuclear disarmament. Waltz observes that there have been many past claims that a common fear stemming from the dangers of a new military technology—from lighter-than-air balloons to dynamite—would drive leaders to unprecedented cooperative action, effectively leaving the past behind. History demonstrates, however, that reality has dashed all such expectations.

The claim regarding the transformative effect of nuclear weapons, Waltz contends, will prove no more powerful a dynamic in this regard. It is not because Russian, Chinese, or American leaders are foolish or ignorant or because some national or international villain now precluding disarmament must be corralled so disarmament can proceed. He argues that it is because national leaders predictably will continue to perceive and respond differently to the lethality of nuclear weapons. It may inspire the "peace

wish” of some but not others: “One can equate fear with world peace only if the peace wish exists in all states and is uniformly expressed in their policies.”⁴⁷ Different responses may be deemed reasonable and defensive national behavior in an anarchic system—depending on the external threat each state confronts or anticipates.

A tenet of much realist thought emphasizes that the cooperative transformation of the international system to a benign order is hardly plausible because the system lacks the mutual trust necessary for its own transformation. To establish a much more cooperative system or a benevolent central authority with power would require a level of interstate trust that neither exists now nor can exist prior to the establishment of a rule-based cooperative order that is reliably enforced. This system, as described by Prof. Marion Boggs in 1941, is one of “international law intolerant of violence . . . and an organization of the world community adequate to restrain hostilities.”⁴⁸

The realist paradox confronting the idealist nuclear disarmament agenda is that international trust must already exist to enable the establishment of the central authority or cooperative system that could, in principle, mandate and enforce disarmament. Why so? Because in the absence of a high level of international trust, national leaders should not be expected to accept the risk of ceding their critical tools of power to a weak central authority such as today’s United Nations. If they were to disarm prior to that central authority reliably providing collective security, what then would provide for their protection if opponents did not simultaneously relinquish their tools of power? And what authority and power would enforce their opponents’ disarmament? The realist asks, “Where would such a guarantee come from, and why would it be credible?”⁴⁹ States cannot prudently disarm simply trusting that others will cooperatively do likewise or that a central authority will one day emerge capable of protecting them and enforcing norms. If that level of cooperation and interstate trust existed reliably in the international system, there would be no need for a central authority to provide order and enforce rules—cooperation would be the norm and could be presumed.

The lack of international trust, however, is the condition that many realists suggest permits “no exit” from the anarchic system. The ever-present prospect of aggression by untrustworthy states creates an inherent security concern for others, and the corresponding absence of international trust prevents the consensual creation of a central authority or cooperative order that transforms the system. Its creation would require all members to cooperate reliably and/or to transfer their power to the central authority near-

simultaneously, trusting that possible adversaries would also do so. Yet in the absence of an existing, overarching authority that itself is trustworthy and capable of enforcing good behavior, there can be no basis for expecting that all states would cooperate reliably, transfer power to a central authority, or establish a powerful decentralized cooperative interstate regime.

In sum, many realists see a classic “chicken and egg” problem. The absence of adequate trust and cooperation in the international system drives the need for the transition to a benign central authority or other cooperative order as envisaged by idealists, but it also undermines the prospect for such a transition. Before prudent leaders will be willing to disarm, an alternative mechanism would first need to provide national security. Disarmament cannot be such a mechanism absent transformative mutual trust that does not exist in interstate relations and, by any empirical assessment, does not appear to be in sight.

Consequently, realists often conclude that it is a mistake to present nuclear disarmament as the enlightened alternative to nuclear deterrence and the risk of its failure. It is a non sequitur to assert that because nuclear war must be prevented, nuclear disarmament is the answer, and thus nuclear deterrence should be devalued. This logic presents a false choice because whatever the weaknesses of nuclear deterrence, nuclear disarmament is not a plausible alternative. It essentially is precluded in any meaningful timeframe by the character of the international system and its lack of transformative interstate trust.

In addition, while there is no realist consensus on the level of confidence that may properly be attributed to deterrence strategies, realists generally see value in nuclear deterrence to prevent war and its escalation from historical evidence. This conclusion regarding nuclear deterrence has been reached by a diverse set of academics, historians, and participant-observers. For example, based on extensive and careful research, Richard Lebow and Janice Stein conclude that nuclear deterrence moderated superpower behavior during the Cold War. They state that “once leaders in Moscow and Washington recognized and acknowledged to the other that a nuclear war between them would almost certainly lead to their mutual destruction[,] . . . fear of the consequences of nuclear war not only made it exceedingly improbable that either superpower would deliberately seek a military confrontation with the other[,] it made their leaders extremely reluctant to take any action that they considered would seriously raise the risk of war.”⁵⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, the renowned Cold War historian and Yale University professor, similarly concludes that nuclear deterrence indeed contributed to the long peace among great powers since 1945, calling it “a remarkable

record, unparalleled in modern history.” He adds that it is “likely to continue to be ‘relevant’ to the stability of the international system.”⁵¹ Based on a careful examination of Soviet Politburo records, Russian historian Victor Gobarev concludes that America’s unique nuclear deterrence capabilities “counterbalanced” Soviet local conventional superiority and were “the single most important factor which restrained Stalin’s possible temptation to resolve the [1948–49] Berlin problem by military means. Evidence obtained from [Soviet] oral history clearly supports this fact.”⁵² Historical evidence does *not* indicate that deterrence is infallible but that nuclear weapons have contributed uniquely to the deterrence of war and escalation in the past.⁵³

Thomas Schelling, one of the twentieth century’s most prominent deterrence theorists and a Noble laureate, offered his observation regarding the nuclear disarmament narrative as popularized after the Cold War. It illustrates a realist’s skepticism and the basis for that skepticism; that is, he points to the continuing value of nuclear deterrence in an anarchic system:

Why should we expect a world without nuclear weapons to be safer than one with (some) nuclear weapons? . . .

I have not come across any mention of what would happen in the event of a major war. One might hope that major war could not happen without nuclear weapons, but it always did. . . .

. . . Every responsible government must consider that other responsible governments will mobilize their nuclear weapons [production] base as soon as war erupts, or as soon as war appears likely, there will be at least covert frantic efforts, or perhaps purposely conspicuous efforts to acquire deliverable nuclear weapons as rapidly as possible. And what then?

This [existing] nuclear quiet should not be traded away for a world in which a brief race to reacquire nuclear weapons could become every former nuclear state’s overriding preoccupation.”⁵⁴

As Schelling’s comment suggests, many realists consider a “nuclear world” in which deterrence is the policy guide to be safer than a nuclear-disarmed world. Waltz elaborates on the rationale for this conclusion: “[Nuclear weapons] make the cost of war seem frighteningly high and thus discourage states from starting any wars that might lead to the use of such weapons. Nuclear weapons have helped maintain peace between the great powers and have not led their few other possessors to military adventures. . . . Wars become less likely as the costs of war rise in relation to possible gain.”⁵⁵ The great contribution of nuclear weapons to peace and stability is that, when properly deployed, they can preclude a would-be

aggressor's expectation of gain. And, if conflict occurs, the presence of nuclear weapons can limit its likely escalation.⁵⁶ Indeed, Waltz contends that the disarmament narrative's emphasis on the destructive consequences of nuclear war "has obscured the important benefits [nuclear weapons] promise to states trying to coexist in a self-help world."⁵⁷ A recent editorial discussing British nuclear weapons appearing in the *Times of London* captures this realist position concisely: "Britain's nuclear arsenal is periodically a matter of political controversy but no responsible government would lightly give up a deterrent. In an anarchic international order, the risks of abandoning it would be incalculable."⁵⁸

Conflicting Philosophies and Conflicting Definitions

The key point here is that the fundamental difference separating the competing narratives on nuclear disarmament often reflects their very different interrelated conceptions of the international system, the potential for a cooperative transformation of the existing anarchic international system, and the value of nuclear deterrence. These varying philosophical foundations underlie competing conclusions about the feasibility of global nuclear disarmament and the prudence of pursuing it as the priority goal.

Carr explained the fundamental differences between realists and idealists ("utopians" in Carr's terms) and the all-encompassing effect of those differences. He observed that "the two methods of approach—the [idealist] inclination to ignore what was and what is in contemplation of what should be, and the [realist] inclination to deduce what should be from what was and what is—determine opposite attitudes towards every political problem."⁵⁹ These differences are displayed in contending narratives regarding nuclear disarmament.

These narratives involve different expectations about human decision-making and what is and is not possible with regard to the structure of the international system. Seeing the evidence of history and enduring patterns of human behavior, realists argue that the needed transformation of the international system to enable nuclear disarmament is not plausible. The realists' skepticism is based not on ignorance or malevolence, but on the inescapable constraints that an anarchic system places on prudent leadership: if some national leaders continue to deem nuclear weapons necessary for their state's security—and thus will not part with them—others will be compelled to do likewise.

In contrast, the idealist disarmament narrative posits that the future can be fundamentally different as reason and the global threat of nuclear weapons compel leaders and peoples toward unprecedented cooperative

steps and the transformation of the international system. It is not thoughtless sentimentalism; it sees nuclear disarmament as both a possible dynamic for that transition process and a consequence of it.

These realists and idealists consequently bring different speculative assumptions to the question and see fundamentally different goals and actions as reasonable for national decision-making. Realists see national leaders as continually compelled by security concerns to pursue state power, potentially including nuclear power, as prudent and necessary to address those concerns. Idealists see the continuing national accumulation of power, particularly including nuclear power, as the greatest security threat confronting all humankind. They thus seek to marshal global popular and elite opinion in opposition to nuclear weapons in the expectation that general nuclear disarmament is feasible and necessary for global security. These fundamentally conflicting realist and idealist perspectives include (1) the character of the international system; (2) the source of greatest risk to states in the system; and (3) the constitution of prudent, reasonable behavior for national leaders. Diverging views drive incompatible conclusions about the wisdom and feasibility of global nuclear disarmament and the relative value of nuclear deterrence.

In an apparent confirmation of realist claims about the continuing power of the international system's anarchic nature to shape national policies, neither Russia nor China followed the US lead of the past decade promoting nuclear zero.⁶⁰ The problem for realists, as Paul Bracken has observed, was that "nuclear abolition—as seen from Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang—looked like a way to make the world safe for U.S. conventional strong-arms tactics."⁶¹ The deputy commander of US Strategic Command, Vice Adm David Kriete, concludes that following the Cold War

one of the assumptions made [in 2010] was that Russia is our friend, and if the United States leads the world in reducing the roles of numbers of nuclear weapons, and [its] prominence in our national security policies, then the rest of the world would follow. It's a very noble goal. But the intervening eight years proved to be very difficult because every other country that has nuclear weapons that could potentially threaten the United States or our allies did exactly the opposite.

While the United States actually did reduce the numbers and some of the types of [nuclear] systems, Russia greatly increased [its] number of nuclear weapons, the means that [it has] to deliver them, and most importantly, the prominence that nuclear weapons play in [its] military doctrine.

... We saw China increase [its] number of nuclear weapons, and ... North Korea developed not only a nuclear weapons capability but also, throughout 2017 and 2018, a whole number of ballistic missile launchers of various ranges.⁶²

The director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lt Gen Robert Ashley, recently remarked that “Russia sees its nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantor of the country’s survival, perceives a warfighting role for [their] use, and directs its scarce resources to its nuclear modernization effort. ... China is likely to double the size of its nuclear stockpile in the course of implementing the most rapid expansion and diversification of its nuclear arsenal in China’s history.”⁶³

Russian leaders clearly continue to see nuclear weapons as essential to Russia’s security and are unwilling to forego them in a dangerous world. American general Curtis Scaparrotti, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, indicates that Russia values and modernizes its nuclear weapons arsenal as the means necessary to succeed against the United States. This view, he says, “facilitates Moscow’s mistaken belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield [nuclear] weapons, can provide Russia a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict.”⁶⁴ Andrei Kokoshin, a member of the Russian State Duma and former Russian Security Council secretary, pronounced in 2010, “There will be no alternative to nuclear deterrence even in the distant future.”⁶⁵ Russian commentator Mikhail Alexandrov captured apparent thinking in Moscow: “Given NATO’s clear advantage in conventional armaments, the threat of a nuclear response currently serves as Russia’s main deterrent against aggression.”⁶⁶ Apparently in response to recently expressed US interest in the possibility of further nuclear reductions, the head of the Russian Duma’s Committee on International Affairs, Leonid Slutsky, stated, “Balance of powers between Moscow and Washington is based on so-called mutual assured destruction. ... If it won’t be the case anymore, there would be a risk of real war, no more, no less.”⁶⁷ Correspondingly, Russia’s ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, has emphasized that Russia has no interest in an agreement to limit its new types of nuclear weapons and labeled as “impossible” and “useless” attempts to seek the disarmament of nuclear powers “in defiance of their legitimate security interests.”⁶⁸

Jon Wolfsthal, a senior official with responsibility for arms control during the Obama administration, acknowledges that Moscow’s mistrust of a powerful United States undermined its possible interest in nuclear disarmament. He indicates that “every time we said we wanted to reduce the

role of nuclear weapons . . . what Russia heard was, we want to be able to do whatever we want with conventional weapons anytime, anywhere.”⁶⁹ Alexei Arbatov, a well-known Russian national security expert and former senior member of the Russian Duma, also identifies the basic problems in US-Russian relations in realist terms—“political hostilities, intransigence and total distrust.”⁷⁰

The consequences of such distrust—seemingly inherent in the anarchic interstate system—are predictable. Given Moscow’s perception of threats to its security and distrust of the United States, and with no prospect in sight of a reliable global authority or cooperative interstate system, Russian leaders are unwilling to give up nuclear weapons: “Russia’s deterrence potential should be ensured by an efficient modernization of Russia’s strategic [nuclear] forces, not by any formal guarantees from the U.S.”⁷¹ This stance does not necessarily reflect malevolence on Moscow’s part; Russian leaders undoubtedly see no prudent option for nuclear disarmament. Even if others plead benign intentions, intentions can change. Such concerns are the natural consequence of an anarchic system. As Waltz observes, “In international politics . . . friendliness and hostility are transient qualities.”⁷²

Realism and Idealism in US Nuclear Policy

While the philosophic divide separating realists and idealists is substantial, there can be a convergence of policy views across this divide. For a relatively brief period following the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War and amid widespread, optimistic expectations of a “New World Order,” nuclear disarmament rebounded as a contender for US nuclear policy dominance. Some prominent realists adopted the nuclear disarmament agenda—if not the underlying idealist philosophic positions. Indeed, not all disarmament proponents are necessarily idealists. Advocates for nuclear disarmament have included celebrated former US senior officials George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, all with extensive national security experience.⁷³ The promotion of nuclear disarmament by former senior officials, particularly including former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, illustrates that some influential figures with undoubted realist credentials adopted the goals of the contemporary disarmament narrative.

For realists, acceptance of the nuclear zero goal was based largely on several popular Western post-Cold War notions. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union and relatively benign relations with Russia and China immediately following the Cold War had largely eliminated any serious interstate nuclear threats against the West.⁷⁴ Second, nuclear terrorism was now

the serious potential nuclear threat, and counterproliferation measures—not nuclear deterrence—were key to addressing that threat. Finally, US conventional force superiority around the globe allowed the United States to meet its priority security requirements without the need for nuclear weapons.⁷⁵

The apparent realist evolution in favor of nuclear disarmament, however, arose and subsided relatively quickly.⁷⁶ As great power relations in the post–Cold War era moved rapidly and unexpectedly in hostile directions, most realist support for the nuclear zero campaign appeared to wane. Realists generally did not believe the transformation of the international system to be forthcoming such that Western security concerns would be addressed by some form of global cooperative or collective security. Rather, for realists, support for nuclear zero was based on the popular view that in the post–Cold War era, nuclear weapons were increasingly irrelevant to US national security within a much-changed security context. For the United States, the security challenges remained, but because the US power position was so overwhelming without nuclear weapons, it could meet them without nuclear capabilities: “In a non-nuclear world, America would enjoy the advantages of geography (the protection afforded by two wide oceans and friendly neighbors in Canada and Mexico), the world’s most powerful conventional forces, and an unrivaled network of allies.”⁷⁷ Some realists thus could conclude that the United States was well positioned to forego nuclear weapons.

Consequently, realists supporting the idealist disarmament agenda had not necessarily embraced idealist thought, *per se*. Instead, they were able to endorse nuclear disarmament for reasons well within the realist philosophic tradition: as the globe’s only “hyperpower,” the United States could prudently dispense with nuclear weapons without undermining its own security position.⁷⁸ With this construction, some realists could lend their voices in favor of nuclear disarmament. Interestingly, the American conventional force advantages that gave some US realists the freedom to endorse nuclear disarmament had precisely the opposite effect on Russian realists—reflecting again the power of the anarchic structure of the international system to shape national thinking.

The reemergence of great power hostilities and nuclear threats appeared to cool much continuing enthusiasm for the nuclear disarmament agenda among American realists, especially those with national security responsibilities.⁷⁹ As Frank Rose, the Obama administration’s assistant secretary of state for arms control, observed recently in support of a comprehensive US nuclear modernization program, “The security environment has changed dramatically since President Barack Obama delivered his famous speech

in Prague in April 2009. Instead of joining the United States in expanding efforts to reduce nuclear threats, Russia and China have gone in the opposite direction, investing in new nuclear weapons systems, conventional strike, and asymmetric capabilities.” He concludes that “given these realities, it is critical that the United States modernize its strategic nuclear deterrent in a way that reassures allies and enhances strategic stability.”⁸⁰

The tension between realism and idealism in US foreign policy can be traced to the country’s founding.⁸¹ To a considerable extent, however, there has been a realist consistency in US nuclear policy for decades.⁸² Throughout the Cold War, as now, the global threat of nuclear weapons clearly animated an idealist disarmament orientation in much of the academic and popular commentary regarding nuclear weapons. But with a few brief exceptions, Republican and Democratic administration officials have brought realist thought to the US nuclear policy table. The manifest nuclear threat to the United States and allies posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War undoubtedly encouraged official thinking toward realism, but much less so academic thinking. Sir Michael Howard helps to explain why:

Nobody who has been brought into contact with that inner group of civil and military specialists who are responsible for the security of this country can fail to notice the almost physical pressure exerted on them by that responsibility, affecting their processes of thought (and often their manner of speech) in much the same way as the movements of a man are affected when he tries to walk in water. . . . They share a common skepticism as to the possibility of disarmament, or indeed of the creation of any effective international authority to whom they can turn over any portion of their responsibilities.

He adds the critical point that “the impatient onlookers, who have never themselves been plunged into that element, cannot understand why.”⁸³

In an apparent official US embrace of nuclear disarmament, the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty, a treaty to which the United States is fully committed, calls on each party “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.” However, immediately following that text in Article VI is the proviso “and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”⁸⁴

Even the most dowdy realist can embrace the call for nuclear disarmament in the context of “general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.” How so? The condition of “general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international con-

trol” must presume that the international order has been transformed and that a reliable form of global collective security has been established—effectively mitigating the interstate security dilemma. With the assumption of such a transformed international order, realists can easily support nuclear disarmament—even while doubting that such an order is ever likely to be established—because security concerns and interstate armed conflict would no longer be an enduring feature of the international system.

President Obama’s famed 2009 Prague speech emphasizing nuclear disarmament also suggests an official embrace of the idealist agenda: “The United States will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons.” However, President Obama’s endorsement of nuclear zero was followed immediately by a realist caveat: “Make no mistake: As long as these [nuclear] weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies.”⁸⁵

For those officials responsible for national security, global concepts based on the expectation of unprecedented and near-universal consensus and cooperation are likely to appear very distant and fragile given the external threats they must confront. As one Air Force general officer quipped regarding the prospect of nuclear disarmament, “I hope that day comes. I hope that day comes soon. And when it does, I want to invite you all over to my house for a party. I’d just ask that you don’t feed any of the hors d’oeuvres to my unicorn.”⁸⁶

Reasoned Dialogue, Debate, and Reconciliation?

There are numerous consequences of the connections between realist and idealist thought and contending nuclear narratives. Perhaps the most obvious is its effect on the character of the internal US debate about nuclear disarmament. Nuclear disarmament advocates and their realist skeptics typically talk past each other, including in academic settings.⁸⁷ Engagements intended to compare and openly discuss conflicting ideas and arguments—with the goal of enhanced mutual understanding and possibly finding some points of congruence and agreement—are rare. The notion that “iron sharpens iron”—that each side can learn from the other—appears to have been lost.⁸⁸ Instead, a result of this seemingly irreconcilable divide is that nuclear idealists and realists typically engage only within their own closed circles and echo chambers. Two mutually exclusive positions are expressed vocally and repetitively, with little reference to the other except as a foil against which to argue. As in the past, idealists advance a global solution to a critical concern, that concern now being the

existence of nuclear weapons. Realists often respond with great skepticism regarding the feasibility—and thus the wisdom—of an idealist global solution. As in the past, idealists counter that their solution “must be made to work because the consequences of its failure to work would be so disastrous.”⁸⁹ Technology advances, but this familiar realist and idealist juxtaposition remains unchanged.

Instead, these contending realist and idealist narratives often portray each other as contributing to the respective security threats that concern them most. Indeed, the occasionally expressed disdain each side has for the other—built on seemingly irreconcilable differences—can be palpable. In a relatively small policy community, this gulf appears to have long cooled much enthusiasm for reasoned, amicable discourse. Idealists often appear to see realists as acting from bad or foolish intent to prevent reasonable and prudent movement toward global transformation and nuclear disarmament.⁹⁰ Some seem to doubt even the possibility of principled, thoughtful realist opposition to their disarmament agenda and deem realists who are critical as being hardheaded, hard-hearted, or psychologically deficient. How else to explain realist skepticism of the obviously unalloyed moral good of pursuing global transformation and nuclear disarmament as the priority goal? Because realists see a continuing security concern, they often appear to consider idealist disarmament initiatives as naïvely threatening US deterrence capabilities and security in a dangerous, anarchic international environment. These initiatives threaten the “comfort” that Waltz suggests resides in “the fact that history has shown that where nuclear capabilities emerge, so, too, does stability.”⁹¹

Each side can view the other as being an obstacle to decisions and actions that are obviously prudent and necessary to preserve security—with many idealists advocating from a global perspective for changed national behavior and many realists seeking instead to preserve national power given the continuing insecurity of global anarchy. Their differences following from their conflicting philosophical moorings appear largely irreconcilable, allowing little margin for a possible middle ground. But that appearance could give way—to some extent—to sincere, amicable efforts to find synthesis.

Summary and Conclusion

Realism and idealism posit contrary basic beliefs about human decision-making and the character of interstate relations. Referencing history, realists tend to focus on the constraints an anarchic international system and established patterns of human decision-making place on interstate

behavior—compelling national leaders to prioritize power in response to the security threats inherent in an anarchic system. In contrast, idealists see the dangers of an anarchic system and focus on the priority goal of transforming it—a goal they deem feasible if national leaders will follow reason and enlightened self-interest. These contrary realist and idealist starting points lead to very different conclusions about what constitute reasonable national goals and prudent behavior.

Applied to nuclear policy, idealist thought for decades has been the basis for a series of largely academic proposals for the transformation of international relations and nuclear disarmament. US Cold War declarations about nuclear policy often reflected idealist aspirations, but US maintenance of a powerful nuclear arsenal generally reflected persistent realist thought. The Cold War ended peacefully with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact alliance. However, in a seeming confirmation of the realist description of international relations and the power of security concerns to shape behavior, neither Russia nor China embraced the Western post-Cold War nuclear disarmament campaign.

The dilemma that now confronts us is that both idealism and realism appear to have captured truths about what should be and what is, respectively. The idealist's contemporary focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war surely is valid: the risks to humanity of the employment of nuclear weapons are simply so extreme in so many scenarios that nuclear war must be prevented. However, the contention that nuclear disarmament is the answer and correspondingly that nuclear deterrence must be demoted presumes that the necessary cooperative transformation of the interstate system is likely within a meaningful timeframe. Yet degrading nuclear deterrence now in favor of transformation and disarmament risks "waiting for Godot" because also valid is the realist's basic contention that the timely transformation of the interstate system needed for cooperative global nuclear disarmament appears implausible in the extreme. Why? Because as John Mearsheimer concludes with understatement, "It is unlikely that all the great powers will simultaneously undergo an epiphany."⁹² The apparent tranquility of the immediate post-Cold War period that led many to optimism in this regard no longer exists.

The two truths that nuclear war must be prevented and that the global transformation needed for disarmament perpetually appears to be nowhere in sight mean that—at least for the contemporary period of resurgent nuclear threats to the West—a dowdy realist conclusion holds: deterrence combined with diplomacy is the least miserable option now available to prevent nuclear war. While it may seem counterintuitive, the

goal of precluding nuclear conflict to the extent possible does not necessarily point to the wisdom of prioritizing a nuclear disarmament policy. It is not the path when, in an enduringly anarchic international system, US disarmament moves could degrade the functioning of deterrence and thereby increase the risk of war. Every prudent step must be made to ensure that deterrence is as secure, credible, reliable, and safe as possible. Yet, prioritizing credible deterrence certainly is compatible with complementary diplomacy.

These conclusions—that sustaining credible nuclear deterrence is likely a safer alternative than devaluing it in serious expectation of timely international transformation and nuclear disarmament—admittedly reflect speculation about alternative futures that is based on the manifest resilience of the international system's anarchic structure and inference from history and patterns of leadership behavior.⁹³ Such speculation is resistant to serious probabilistic prediction. However, given contemporary threats to the West, including nuclear, the premature demotion of nuclear deterrence could indeed unintentionally precipitate its failure. Others obviously disagree with these conclusions—hence the potential value of a worthy debate vice dueling monologues.

With the Cold War long over and the subsequent great optimism about a New World Order long gone, it remains to be seen whether realists and idealists will now begin to engage each other on nuclear policy issues at the level of ideas and with a degree of mutual respect and decorum or will continue to engage largely within their own respective closed circles. The path of least resistance favors the latter. If so, the character and content of the US nuclear “debate” will almost certainly remain a matter of competing voices repetitively talking past one another.

In contrast, those participating in the marketplace of ideas regarding nuclear disarmament could, without acrimony, identify and defend to the extent possible the realist and idealist philosophic foundations of their competing positions. For example, realists must explain why we should limit our expectations regarding future leadership decision-making and states' behavior to established patterns, past and present. Why is the prospect for timely profound change of the international system for the better so remote as to be implausible? There are some past examples of profound changes in the structure of human relations, such as the creation of the nation-state system itself. Why then is the systemic transformation envisaged by idealists implausible?

Idealists in turn must explain why, at this point in history, we should seriously expect diverse national leaderships to achieve the enlightened

interstate trust, consensus, and cooperation needed to transform the international order and disarm—beyond the unconvincing assertions that it can happen because it must or because “no law of nature stands in the way.” No law of nature precludes the cooperative resolution of conflicting interests within individual state borders wherein some form of central authority exists. But it would seem imprudent for government officials to plan as if horrific domestic criminal violence—which claims approximately 500,000 lives every year globally—will end anytime soon by the application of reason and enlightened self-interest.

An engagement so emphasizing the transparency of the different philosophical origins underlying contending positions on disarmament and deterrence would likely demand an unprecedented level of introspection on the part of many participants. The competing realist and idealist positions could well remain irreconcilable. Nonetheless, greater transparency regarding the philosophical origins and logic of these dueling positions and their most significant points of departure would add substance to the typically superficial language and callings that often dominate public discussions. It would help give leaders and policy makers the privilege of making more informed comparisons of the veracity of these competing positions. **ISSQ**

Notes

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4. Crawford, 4.
5. Beatrice Fihn, “Confronting Russia’s Nuclear Aggression,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.usnews.com/>.
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52. Victor Gobarev, "Soviet Military Plans and Actions during the First Berlin Crisis, 1948–1949," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 1997): 5; and James M. Action, *Deterrence During Disarmament: Deep Nuclear Reductions and International Security* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), 34.

53. Keith Payne and James Schlesinger, *Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Evidence* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2013), 13–14. Evidence of the deterring effect of nuclear weapons is not limited to US–Soviet Cold War history. Gen Shankar Roychowdhury, India's former Army chief, has observed that "Pakistan's nuclear weapons deterred India from attacking that country after the Mumbai strikes" and that "it was due to Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons that India stopped short of a military retaliation." "Pak's N-Bomb Prevented Indian Retaliation after 26/11," *The Indian Express*, 9 March 2009, <http://www.indianexpress.com/>.

54. Thomas Schelling, "A World without Nuclear Weapons?" *Daedalus* 138, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 125–126, 129, https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/daedalus/downloads/09_fall_daedalus_articles.pdf.

55. Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons*.

56. Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons*.

57. Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons*.

58. "The Times View on the Trident Service at Westminster Abbey: Deterrence Defended," *The Times* (UK), 3 May 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/>. As British prime minister Margaret Thatcher explained years earlier, "Wars are not caused by the buildup of weapons. They are caused when an aggressor believes he can achieve objectives at an acceptable price. . . . Our task is to see that potential aggressors, from whatever quarter, understand plainly that the capacity and resolve of the West would deny them victory and that the price they would pay would be intolerable." Quoted in Keith Payne, *The Great American Gamble* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), 149.

59. Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 11.

60. The Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, recently affirmed that China "has no interest" in negotiating a nuclear arms control treaty with the United States and Russia. See "China 'has no interest' in joining US–Russia nuclear deal," Associated Press, 13 May 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/>.

61. Bracken, "Whatever Happened to Nuclear Abolition?"

62. Quoted in Maria Gallucci, "US Nuclear Weapons Expert on Low-Yield Warheads, Stockpile Stewardship, and Plutonium Pit Production," *IEEE Spectrum*, 20 May 2019, <https://spectrum.ieee.org/>.

63. Lt Gen Robert P. Ashley, Jr., director, Defense Intelligence Agency, "Russian and Chinese Nuclear Modernization Trends" (remarks, Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C., 29 May 2019), <https://www.dia.mil/>.

64. Quoted in Joel Gehrke, "Russians Are Serious about Using Nukes, US NATO General Warns," *Washington Examiner*, 13 March 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/>.

65. Kokoshin quoted in "No Alternative to Nuclear Deterrence," *Interfax-AVN*, 22 November 2010, <http://www.dialog.com/proquestdialog/>.

66. Quoted in "Good Luck with That: Obama Tries to Trick Russia into Nuclear Disarmament," *Sputnik News*, 12 July 2016, <http://sputniknews.com/>.

67. Romeo Ranoco, "Nuclear Disarmament of Russia, US and China Could Lead to Real War—Russian MP," *Reuters*, 26 April 2019, <https://www.rt.com/russia/>.

68. Patrick Tucker, "New START a Nonstarter: Russian Ambassador," *Defense One*, 12 March 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/>; and "Moscow Will Not Support Full Nuclear Disarmament—Russia's US Ambassador," TASS Russian News Agency, 1 December 2017, <http://tass.com/>.

69. Quoted in "The Trump Administration's New Nuclear Posture Review" (press briefing, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 23 January 2018), transcript, <https://www.armscontrol.org/taxonomy/term/4>.

70. Quoted in Peter Cobus, "Analysts Call Scrapping INF 'Strategic Catastrophe' for Kremlin," *VOA News*, 2 February 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

71. Alexei Arbatov, "The Twists and Turns of Missile Defense," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 7 November 2011, eastview.com.

72. Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons*.

73. See, for example, George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 January 2007, <https://www.wsj.com/>; and George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "Toward a Nuclear-Free World," *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 January 2008, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/>.

74. In 1995 then-Secretary of Defense William Perry observed, "Today, Russia is a partner rather than an enemy." William J. Perry, Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, February 1995), 8, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1995_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-152712-813. In 2010 Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said, "I don't see Russia as a threat. I see Russia—Russian-U.S. relations being those of normal states now." Department of Defense, "Interfax News Agency Interview with Secretary Gates," news transcript, 13 September 2010, <https://archive.defense.gov/>.

75. Each of these points is well reflected in James Cartwright et al., *Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Strategy, Force Structure and Posture, Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report* (Washington, D.C.: Global Zero, May 2012), https://www.globalzero.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf. Many proponents have suggested that nuclear disarmament should be attractive to the United States because it "can gain from its strong comparative advantage in conventional technologies." See Cortright and Väyrynen, *Towards Nuclear Zero*, 19.

76. See, for example, Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, "Nuclear Weapons Reductions Must Be Part of Strategic Analysis," *The Washington Post*, 22 April 2012. The most recent joint article regarding nuclear weapons by three of the original "four horsemen" focuses not on "nuclear zero" but on "meaningful dialogue between Washington and Moscow," increasing "cooperation, transparency, and security," "strengthening the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and renewing dialogue with Russia," and "dialogue on strategic stability." These are all recommendations that realists can applaud. See George Shultz, William J. Perry, and Sam Nunn, "The Threat of Nuclear War Is Still with Us," *Wall Street Journal*, 11 April 2019, A17.

77. Steven Pifer, "10 Years after Obama's Nuclear-Free Vision, the US and Russia Head in the Opposite Direction," *Order from Chaos* (blog), Brookings, 4 April 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/>.

78. This point that realist support for the nuclear zero agenda emerged *without* the acceptance of idealist thinking was rightly noted by Richard Falk. See David Krieger and Richard Falk, "Where We Stand: A Dialogue," in Falk and Krieger, *At the Nuclear Precipice*, 236, 245.

79. See, for example, Kissinger and Scowcroft, "Nuclear Weapons Reductions."

80. Frank A. Rose and Benjamin Bahney, "Reassuring Allies and Strengthening Strategic Stability: An Approach to Nuclear Modernization for Democrats," *War on the Rocks*, 16 April 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

81. See Bernard Bailyn, *To Begin the World Anew* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 60–99.

82. See Kurt Guthe, *Ten Continuities in U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy, Strategy, Plans, and Forces* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2008), http://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/N-Continuities-Draft_Rev-2.11.pdf.

83. Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), 215–16.

84. Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, opened for signature 1 July 1968, art. X, para. 1, 21 U.S.T. 483, 493, 729 U.N.T.S. 161, 175 (entered into force 5 March 1970), <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text/>.

85. The White House, "Remarks by President Barack Obama."

86. Quoted in Payne and Schlesinger, *Minimum Deterrence*, 3.

87. Hugh Gusterson, "The Dangerous Disregard of Nuclear Experts for One Another," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 25 March 2015, <https://thebulletin.org/2015/03/>. Johns Hopkins professor

Francis Gavin rightly notes, “The nuclear field . . . seems especially divided and stovepiped into various tribes. Nuclear policy is discussed in fundamentally different ways in different settings.” Francis J. Gavin, “We Need to Talk: The Past, Present and Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy,” *War on the Rocks*, 2 January 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

88. From Proverbs 27:17.

89. Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 8.

90. For a classic example of this idealist thinking, see Walter Cronkite, “Cronkite Champions World Government,” *The Washington Times*, 3 December 1999, A2.

91. Kenneth Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July/August 2012): 5.

92. John Mearsheimer, “Realists as Idealists,” *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (2011): 428.

93. Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons*.

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