

# "Global Zero" and the future of non-proliferation

Michael Rühle\*

The vision of a world without nuclear weapons is aimed at facilitating measures to strengthen the global non-proliferation regime. However, the logic of "Global Zero" ignores too many realities of the international security environment to become a guiding principle for US policy. If the United States were to subordinate its security policy to the Global Zero narrative, the results might well be counterproductive, as a weakening of the US role as a security provider would fuel rather than contain nuclear proliferation.

## 1. Introduction: the return of non-proliferation

Over the last few years, the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons has advanced into one of the most intensely debated issues of the international security debate. Sparked by growing concerns about the world reaching a nuclear "tipping point", the view has gained ground that time was running out, and that there was now the last opportunity to prevent nuclear anarchy. To exploit this opportunity, however, a new political momentum was needed – a momentum that could only be generated if it were based on the unequivocal commitment of the Nuclear Weapon States to seek a world without nuclear arms. Without such a commitment, so the argument goes, the international community would remain divided over the issue of nuclear possession, thus rendering serious progress on non-proliferation impossible.

That the end of the Bush Administration would lead to a revival of traditional non-proliferation policies was to be expected. Despite having scored two major non-proliferation successes – the uncovering of the A. Q. Khan network and the voluntary denuclearization of Libya – the Bush Administration could not escape the charges that its unilateralist policies had contributed to an erosion of the non-proliferation re-

gime. Many observers argued that the Bush Administration's view, according to which the crisis of non-proliferation was first and foremost a crisis of compliance, was too narrow and purposefully sought to deflect attention from the Nuclear Weapon States' own obligations. According to many observers, Washington's attempt to carve out for itself the widest margin of manoeuvre, while seeking to constrain others, was ultimately counterproductive, as it only served to deepen existing rifts between the nuclear "haves" and "have-nots". Inevitably, therefore, a successor Administration would seek to repair the damage done and re-commit the US to established non-proliferation principles and processes.

However, while this re-commitment was to be expected, the way in which it manifests itself was not. The degree to which the Obama Administration has endorsed "abolitionist" arguments was as surprising as was the degree to which the new Administration appeared willing to subordinate US foreign and defence policy to non-proliferation concerns. Shortly after President Obama took office, a deft political choreography sought to generate a new political momentum in non-proliferation and arms control. President Obama's Prague speech in April 2009, in which he unveiled his vision of a nuclear-free world, was followed by a US-

inspired UN Security Council Resolution that echoed this same sentiment. In early 2010, a new US-Russia treaty on the reduction of strategic nuclear arms was signed, followed by a Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, and the publication of a Nuclear Posture Review that claimed to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US defence strategy. By investing a lot of political capital the US Administration also achieved a successful conclusion of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. All these steps were meant to create the impression of an irresistible political force – a charismatic US President leading the world on a project that seemed both morally appealing and politically necessary.

## 2. The non-proliferation narrative as a useful policy guideline?

It is obvious that this policy follows a distinct "script" – it is clearly based in the world view of the orthodox non-proliferation community. Indeed, no other US Administration appears to be more strongly influenced by the thinking of this community. The Obama Administration's policy reflects many of the core beliefs of this community: that nuclear weapons have turned from an asset into a liability and that there is now a unique opportunity to rid the world of these weapons; that the crisis of non-proliferation is essentially a result of the Nuclear Weapons States not fulfilling their part of the NPT bargain (and of US unilateralist delusions); and that, consequently, the US must lead by example in re-launching the non-proliferation process. In short, the policy is based on an action-reaction paradigm which sees US behaviour as the catalyst to induce change on a global scale. Simply put, once the US starts changing its nuclear policies, the rest of the world is bound to follow. As more and more countries become convinced of the US' sincerity about seeking genuine change, a virtuous circle of reciprocal, confidence-building steps will emerge that will

gradually move the world away from the nuclear abyss. While the goal of a nuclear-free world is not likely to be achieved any time soon, it is essential to keep clinging to it, as it remains the ultimate proof of the United States' sincerity.

It is easy to see why this general narrative of non-proliferation orthodoxy is so attractive. It follows a clear, comprehensible logic; it revolves around noble notions of equality and justice; and it is, at its most basic, about creating a better future. Equally importantly, it also appeals to a deeply ingrained US desire to exert (benign) leadership. Still, it remains doubtful whether this policy can achieve its aims. As a closer look reveals, a policy that takes its cues from the non-proliferation/Global Zero repertoire will fail both conceptually and politically. Conceptually, such a policy fails to capture the complex nature of nuclear proliferation dynamics, and advocates solutions that will only deal with a small part of the problem. Politically, Global Zero overestimates the ability of the US to lead the process, delegitimizes Western security policies, and risks undermining the credibility of US extended deterrence. In short, the outcome could well be paradoxical: a policy that seeks to roll back proliferation might ultimately end up encouraging it.

## 3. Proliferation dynamics

There are currently five recognized (US, UK, France, Russia, China) and four unofficial Nuclear Weapons States (India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea). The fact that most of these countries achieved their nuclear status a long time ago, and that several would-be nuclear nations either reconsidered (South Africa, several states from the former Soviet Union) or were prevented from realizing their nuclear ambitions (Iraq, Libya) has made nuclear proliferation proceed rather slowly overall. It is impossible to prove with certainty whether we owe proliferation's

slow pace to the NPT or simply to the fact that most nations had no interest in going nuclear in the first place. The popular argument that proliferation has proceeded more slowly than many analysts predicted in the early 1960s means very little: it simply measures "success" by a 1960s yardstick, i.e. against a period of widespread proliferation pessimism. Moreover, the fact that several countries joined the NPT with the clear intention to go nuclear "inside" the Treaty suggests that the NPT was not as instrumental to non-proliferation as its most ardent supporters suggest.

It is equally impossible to produce a unified theory of proliferation. The motives for countries to go nuclear are too diverse to allow for a single explanation. Among the likely causes for going nuclear are regional security concerns (Israel in the 1950s); fears of abandonment (Taiwan in the 1960s; South Korea in the 1970s); balance-of-power considerations (China and India in the 1960s and 1970s; Brazil and Argentina in the 1970s; India and Pakistan since the 1970s); bargaining power (North Korea since the 1990s); regional hegemonic ambitions (Iran today) or simply a craving for more prestige and respect (Iraq and Libya in the 1980s). What unites all these cases, however, is that the NPT does not appear to have been a major limiting factor. While the NPT and its complementing regime of export controls helps to ensure that developing a military nuclear programme remains time-consuming, expensive, and difficult to hide over the long term, it has not prevented determined proliferators from realizing their ambitions.

The sui generis character of each proliferation case also makes predictions about future proliferation trends next to impossible. The fact that more than 30 countries are currently assumed to have the advanced civilian nuclear infrastructure for building nuclear weapons has little explanatory value, all the

less so as many of these countries are transparent democracies without existential security problems. However, if one tries to draw up a list of countries which are either suspected of building a bomb, or might choose to do so if their security situation was taking a turn for the worse, the list of countries that are mentioned in the specialist literature is still over a dozen countries long: Iran, Myanmar (Burma), the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Turkey, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Brazil and Venezuela.

The fact that this list includes several countries that would appear to be too technologically backward to develop nuclear weapons indicates the fundamental changes that have occurred over the past twenty years: the diffusion of technology as a result of globalization, the increasing commercialization of proliferation (including through semi-private networks), and the undiminished interest in civilian nuclear energy have created opportunities for less developed countries that were hitherto unavailable. The A. Q. Khan network's support for Iran, Iraq, North Korea and Libya, as well as North Korea's selling of nuclear reactors to Syria and possibly other countries, demonstrate that proliferation proceeds in ways that were unanticipated by the inter-state non-proliferation regime. Even functioning warhead designs (i.e. those that do not need to be tested) are available for purchase. In the years to come, this trend may be reinforced by other considerations, such as assuring access to affordable fossil fuel. This has already become visible in China's resistance against tougher sanctions on Iran that could compromise its energy ties with Tehran. However, the case of China is not likely to remain unique. As the global economic crisis proceeds and natural resources become even scarcer, national security considerations will increasingly be influenced by economic interests – at the expense of traditional non-proliferation norms.

#### 4. Solutions

Despite these new opportunities for states with nuclear ambitions, there is nothing inherently deterministic about the future shape of the proliferation landscape. For example, if Iran were to decide to remain a mere "virtual" nuclear power, several countries in the region might reconsider their choice as well, and a "proliferation cascade" in the Middle East might be avoided. In short, a major new proliferation wave is not inevitable. Still, as arbitrary as the above list may seem, it allows for two preliminary conclusions.

First, effectively dealing with such a motley crew of current and potential proliferators will follow individual rather than "universal" approaches. This has already been demonstrated in the case of Libya's voluntary disarmament, the Iraq war, the different types of negotiations with Iran and North Korea, the unravelling of the A. Q. Khan network, the US-India nuclear deal, and Israel's destruction of the Korean-built Syrian reactor in September 2007. Each case was handled differently, with a wide range of "carrots and sticks" – all the way to the application of military force. Moreover, each case was largely dealt with outside the NPT framework. And each case was – and continues to be – managed predominantly by the United States.

To be sure, this does not diminish the value of the NPT as the central framework for ensuring transparency, identifying unwelcome behaviour and initiating appropriate responses. However, developments in the recent past demonstrate that the NPT is increasingly being augmented by other approaches. One such approach is the internationalization of uranium enrichment and the agreement on a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty. Other interesting developments are the leading role played by the UN Security Council in dealing with specific proliferation cases,

the introduction of new legislature like UNSCR 1540, and voluntary arrangements like the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).

The second conclusion that can be drawn is that US extended deterrence will remain a key instrument for preventing proliferation. About half of the countries on the aforementioned list are US Allies, some of which had already been flirting with a nuclear option in the past when they had perceived a lessening US willingness to defend them. Several other countries on the list are likely to be persuaded from going nuclear by an extension of US security commitments.

#### 5. How does Global Zero measure up?

A diverse group of nations with diverse rationales for going nuclear; a trend towards a commercialization of proliferation; a growing dominance of economic and energy concerns over non-proliferation norms; a diversification of non-proliferation approaches, all the way from "carrots" to "sticks"; and an undiminished relevance of US extended deterrence: if these are the most significant characteristics of the current and possibly future proliferation landscape, then it becomes obvious that a policy based on the Global Zero narrative does not address most of them.

One major flaw of the Global Zero narrative is its obsession with the need for the Nuclear Weapon States, above all the US, to demonstrate "credibility" on disarmament. The non-proliferation mainstream – including the Obama Administration – has bought into the narrative according to which the lacking disarmament credentials of the Nuclear Weapon States were the main reason for the crisis of the non-proliferation regime. Consequently, a re-commitment to

Article VI is seen as the key to a rejuvenation of that regime. This "credibility thesis" (Christopher Ford) has been overplayed to the point where it has effectively become the single issue of the current non-proliferation debate. Large parts of the Western public have now been sold on the argument that Iran's nuclearization was somehow the fault of the existing nuclear powers, notably the US, and that given Israel's nuclear arsenal Iran's ambitions were somehow understandable. Such simplistic action-reaction imagery not only de-politicizes fundamentally political issues; it also seems to postulate a moral equivalence between countries that risks causing alienation between the US and its nuclear-armed allies. For the sake of its own intellectual consistency, the "abolitionist" narrative must not distinguish between friend and foe, irrespective of the political ramifications of such an approach.

Predictably, Israel has become the first ally to be singled out by the US as an obstacle for "getting to zero", yet in order to maintain the momentum of this policy, France and the United Kingdom will also be expected to make their contribution. Moreover, the Global Zero narrative has already been interpreted by many Western analysts and politicians as a blank cheque for advocating all kinds of nuclear reductions – witness the current debate about the future of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. This debate – which remains a debate entirely within the West – demonstrates another drawback of the Global Zero narrative: the logic of embarking on a gradual disarmament process through carefully managed reciprocal steps is too complex for the short-term and parochial policy-making process in Western democracies. The sense of drama and urgency that Global Zero seeks to instil in order to influence policy does not square with the long-term character of the proposed solutions. Simply put, if the world is said to be approaching Armageddon, a long-term, gradualist approach does not look like a promising solution.

## 6. Nuclear deterrence revisionism

Another flaw of the Global Zero narrative is its ambivalence regarding the utility of nuclear deterrence. In order to make Global Zero possible, it needs to be demonstrated that nuclear weapons are becoming less relevant and, hence, can safely be discarded once certain conditions have been met. This argument is complemented by a host of other claims, for example that the non-use of nuclear weapons during the Cold War may not have been the result of nuclear deterrence, but rather the consequence of both political camps being geopolitically saturated; that conventional weapons could take over the operational role of nuclear weapons; that the end of bipolarity and the emergence of a multi-nuclear world were making the continued reliance on nuclear weapons increasingly risky; and that nuclear deterrence was ineffective against 21st century threats such as international terrorism or failed states.

Since it is impossible to prove why an event did not occur, it cannot be proven whether the "long peace" was a direct result of the nuclear stand-off. However, the sharp drop in interstate wars since 1945 would suggest that the advent of nuclear weapons and the emergence of nuclear deterrence did indeed have a moderating effect on international politics. Equally problematic is the argument that the prospect of a multi-nuclear world would turn nuclear weapons into a liability. Few would dispute that a multiple-player game contains a far greater risk of miscalculation than the old bipolar system, and there is a widespread consensus that many new threats cannot be deterred by threatening nuclear retaliation. However, these developments do not diminish the value of nuclear deterrence per se. Put differently, for the current nuclear possessors nuclear weapons may have become less central, but not less important. Indeed, as even one of the most prominent supporters of this school of thought, William Walker,

admits, as long as the most ardent defenders of the NPT refuse to acknowledge the importance of nuclear deterrence, they are missing an essential part of the issue.

## 7. The elephant in the room: Global Zero and extended deterrence

Nowhere does this self-serving nature of the Global Zero narrative become more apparent than in its handling of extended deterrence. While many non-proliferation experts acknowledge the non-proliferation dimension of US extended deterrence commitments, they also realize that this policy justifies high US nuclear force levels and thus runs counter to Global Zero aspirations. Not surprisingly, the Global Zero narrative seeks to downplay the continued value of extended deterrence, arguing that the nuclear abstinence of America's allies and friends was now so firmly ingrained that fears of a new proliferation wave among these countries were unfounded. Accordingly, they argue that the nuclear umbrella could safely be reduced, replaced by a conventional umbrella, or removed altogether.

Here, too, the narrative appears counter-intuitive and self-serving. While extended deterrence is on the back burner in regions that are secure, it remains of central importance for those countries that feel exposed. This has become particularly obvious with respect to Asia, where the US role as a nuclear protector of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan remains undiminished. A similar effect can be observed in the Middle East, where the nuclear shadow cast by Iran has made many countries lean towards the US. Even in Europe, where the security situation is far better, a renewed debate about NATO's role as a provider of reassurance has set in. The palpable desire of Central and Eastern European allies to host US installations, and their concern about a withdrawal of US Tactical Nuclear Weapons from Europe are

strong reminders of the continuing need for an "American Pacifier" (Josef Joffe).

All these developments demonstrate that the non-proliferation successes of the past 40 years were not just a result of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, but also of US extended deterrence commitments. After all, the nuclear abstinence of states in pivotal geopolitical regions is not a law of nature. Rather, it is conditioned on a predictable international system. And, irrespective of the new debate about a "post-American" world, that system is still being upheld by the United States. The US thus faces a dilemma. In order to pursue long-term non-proliferation goals, the United States and the other Nuclear Weapons States need to make a credible commitment to nuclear disarmament; yet the current nuclear reality requires credible US extended deterrence commitments. If the United States were to reduce or even end its role as a nuclear protector, this could result in the largest wave of proliferation since the dawn of the nuclear era. That is why no US Administration – and no US Congress – will go down this path.

In sum, a policy that is based on the Global Zero narrative is based on a flawed interpretation of the international system. It presupposes the existence of a universal non-proliferation norm, yet fails to acknowledge that this "norm" is dependent on specific political constellations. If these constellations change, for example, by the emergence of a nuclear challenger, the security calculus of states changes as well – and the security paradigm begins to trump non-proliferation considerations. This flawed interpretation of the international system accounts for the massive discrepancy between the long-term logic of a disarmament-centric or even non-nuclear order and the short-term requirements to address pressing geopolitical developments. To put it simply, if the current proliferation cases cannot be resolved, there is little point in arguing about grand global

disarmament schemes. Indeed, it is precisely the proliferation pressure generated by Iran and to a lesser extent by North Korea that will reinforce rather than invalidate traditional notions of nuclear counter-deterrence and extended deterrence, i.e. the very tenets of security policy that the "abolitionists" seek to discard or even discredit.

## 8. Conclusion

A policy that is built on the Global Zero narrative cannot guide US security policy for very long. The "abolitionist" logic is analytically too weak and too self-serving to determine the policy of a superpower which continues to be the most important global security provider. Moreover, the very idea that the US could lead and sustain such a "grand geopolitical engineering exercise" (Lawrence Freedman) over a period of decades reveals a stunning neglect of both the complexities of the international security environment and the role of the US in this

environment. As the US Administration becomes entangled in other difficult foreign policy issues, and as domestic priorities begin to dominate the agenda, it is quite conceivable that this policy will fall off the priority list and fade from the public limelight. This appears all the more likely as Global Zero remains an elite project, without a broad public constituency.

It would be unfair to dismiss this policy as just another showcase project of a US Administration that has become notorious for raising expectations beyond its capacity to meet them. The urge to re-launch the global non-proliferation process is clearly inspired by a noble mission: a last-ditch attempt to set the world on a better track before the West's clout as a global norm-setter will have disappeared. Still, the current intellectual excitement about forging a new, nuclear-free international order remains a purely Western creation – a Western soliloquy out of touch with the realities of the globalization age.

## Note

\* Deputy Head, Policy Planning Unit, NATO. The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and do not constitute an official view of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.