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The Utility of Nuclear Weapons Today: Two Views

José de Arimatéia da Cruz

Books Reviewed:

No Use: Nuclear Weapons and US National Security.
By Thomas M. Nichols

Atomic Assistance: How "Atoms for Peace" Programs Cause Nuclear Insecurity.
By Matthew Fuhrmann

My colleague Steven Metz recently wrote a very thought provoking piece, entitled "Thinking About Catastrophe: The Army in a Nuclear Armed World." Metz argues, "nothing is more important to American security than nuclear weapons. Despite all the fretting over terrorism, hybrid threats, and conventional aggression, only nuclear weapons can threaten the existence of the United States and destroy the global economy."¹ Indeed, despite the end of the Cold War and nuclear hostilities between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the topic of nuclear weapons is vital today. Not a day goes by without reference to nuclear weapons in national and international newspapers. For example, the *New York Times*, in its February 18, 2016 online edition, reported that Belgium police discovered ten hours of video purportedly showing a Belgian nuclear official at the home of the Paris attacker, Thierry Werts. Belgium officials argued the terrorist organization network "involved in the coordinated attacks on November 13, 2015, that left 130 dead may also have intended to obtain radioactive material for terrorist purposes."²

Terrorist organizations attempting to acquire nuclear weapons to carry out their nefarious activities, and renegade nation-states also continue to challenge the international system and international law by attempting to acquire nuclear weapons. The most recent example occurred on February 7, 2016, when the "hermit kingdom" of North Korea tested a nuclear bomb and launched a satellite, provoking sharp condemnations from Russia and China as well as South Korea. Despite the fact nuclear weapons could be considered obsolete since an attack by one country could result in massive retaliation by another, the United States maintains a huge nuclear arsenal on high alert and ready for war. The two books considered in this review discuss the utility of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era.

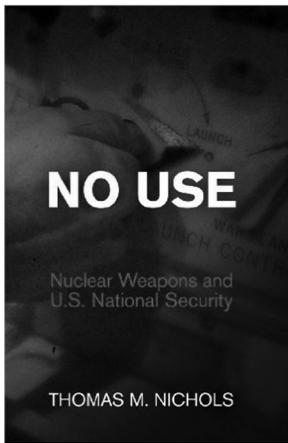
No Use: Nuclear Weapons and US National Security, by Thomas M. Nichols, a Professor of National Security Affairs at the US Naval War College in Newport, examines the current state of US nuclear doctrine

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1 Steven Metz, "Strategic Insights: Thinking About Catastrophe: The Army in a Nuclear Armed World," Strategic Studies Institute, December, 14, 2015, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/index.cfm/articles/Thinking-About-Catastrophe/2015/12/14>.

2 Milan Schreuer and Alissa J. Rubin, "Police Find Video of Nuclear Official at Home of Terrorism Suspect," *New York Times*, February, 19, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/19/world/europe/belgium-nuclear-official-video-paris-attacks.html?ref=world>.

and strategy, the effects of American thinking about nuclear weapons on international security, and the various ways the United States might



Thomas M. Nichols, *No Use: Nuclear Weapons and US National Security* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) 217 pgs. \$39.95

reduce the overall threat of nuclear weapons. (12) Why is it so difficult for the major powers, and the United States in particular, to break their nuclear addiction? What role should nuclear weapons play in America's national security? These are the central questions guiding *No Use*. (5) While the United States has reduced its nuclear stockpiles, it still maintains a considerable number of them.

Are nuclear weapons still relevant in the post-Cold War world? Nichols has his doubts. He argues Cold War-era precepts about nuclear weapons have continued to dominate security policy and nuclear strategies by default. (6) While they may still be considered a good deterrence mechanism, other nations may see nuclear weapons as aggressive tools in the military arsenal of its opponents. For example, Russian officials, despite their displeasure with North Korea for its most recent nuclear test and satellite launch, believe the "North Korean regime is simply fighting for its own survival, using the logic that when a pack of wolves attacks you, only a fool lowers his gun."³ Nichols succinctly argues, "deterrence will not be strengthened by creating smaller or more accurate nuclear bombs or by drawing up military senseless campaigns of desultory nuclear strikes." (157)

Nichols believes a nuclear Armageddon, in the current international system, is unlikely to take place between nation-states. In fact, he contends that without a real threat to the American civilization itself, "nuclear weapons are now more an instrument of choice rather than [of] necessity." (11) Still, he does not take into consideration the possibility terrorist organizations or violent non-states actors may attempt to acquire nuclear weapons to use against their enemies. Nichols proposes the United States re-evaluate what national security means in the context of the post-Cold War international system. For Nichols, a key component to reforming the traditional US notion of national security is an examination of the utility of nuclear weapons. As Nichols argues, "reforming US nuclear doctrine is the key not only to the reform of US national security policy, but also to the reduction of nuclear arsenals and the prevention of the wider spread of nuclear weaponry." (8)

Obviously, what Nichols is calling for is the US Government to reduce its nuclear stockpile in light of the insignificance of nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century as a weapon of choice if a conflict were to break-out. This proposition is not without its detractors. And, Nichols recognizes that when he argues:

...removing nuclear weapons from their pride of place will require a fundamental change in the way Americans and others think about their security.

3 George Toloraya, "A Neighborly Concern: Russia's Evolving Approach to Korean Problems," <http://38north.org/2016/02/gtoloraya021816>.

Efforts to change the Cold War nuclear paradigm will encounter significant political, ideological, and bureaucratic obstacles, because reducing the importance of nuclear weapons will involve remaking American security strategy as a whole. (10)

However, without the US Government taking a leadership role as opposed to “leading from behind,” there will not be a reduction in nuclear weapons among the “nuclear club.”

Moreover, Nichols explains, “only the United States, with its fortunate geopolitical advantages, its unique position of international leadership, and its huge qualitative edge in nuclear matters can meaningfully lead any kind of change in global norms about the purpose and meaning of nuclear arms.” (11)

While many countries and proponents of nuclear weapons propose that nuclear weapons are not weapons of war, but weapons of deterrence, Nichols disagrees. Instead, he argues deterrence is by its nature imprecise, “but every administration claims it is doing only what is necessary to defend the country, and no more or less.” (70) Nichols further argues US policy-makers and nuclear enthusiasts subscribe to the idea of “calculated ambiguity.” (56) Calculated ambiguity was put into practice in the 1990s to respond to the threats of nuclear attacks if carried out by smaller nations. Calculated ambiguity was designed to be vague, deliberately obscuring whether “Washington would resort to nuclear retaliation as punishment for attacks against the United States, its military forces, or its allies” if the attacks were carried out by smaller states using chemical or biological weapons—otherwise known as “poor man’s bombs.” (56)

If nuclear weapons have lost strategic deterrence value in the post-Cold War international system of the twenty-first century, the question becomes: what should the United States new strategic nuclear policy look like? Are nuclear weapons still relevant? Nichols quotes General V. K. Singh, Chief of the Indian Army, who said in 2012 that “nuclear weapons are not for warfighting. They have got a strategic significance and that is where it should be.” (109) According to Nichols, the first and most important step the President of the United States should do is to declare a doctrine of minimum deterrence. (110) The doctrine of minimum deterrence argues:

...the only use for American nuclear weapons would be to deter the use of other nuclear weapons against the United States, and failing that, they would be used purely for retaliation in the event of a nuclear attack that could threaten the national existence of the United States. (110-11)

In the final analysis, Nichols argues, “an American doctrine of minimum deterrence will not only bring US declaratory policy into line with political reality, it will represent the final abandoning of both the pretense, and the burden, of adhering to Cold War nuclear maxims.” (177)

Matthew Fuhrmann’s *Atomic Assistance: How “Atoms for Peace” Programs Cause Nuclear Insecurity* takes a different stance. Nuclear technology has dual utility, that is to say, it can be used to produce nuclear energy or to build nuclear weapons. “Nuclear technology, materials, and know-how are dual use in nature, meaning they have both peaceful and military

application.”(2) Furhmann argues politico-strategic factors drive nuclear marketplace:

Countries provide atomic assistance to enhance their political influence by strengthening recipient countries and improving their bilateral relationships with those states. In particular, suppliers use aid [nuclear] to reinforce their allies and alliances, to forge partnerships with enemies of enemies, and to strengthen existing democracies (if the supplier is also a democracy). (239)

Furhmann goes on to claim “suppliers also barter nuclear technology for oil when they are worried about their energy security.” (239) Despite the recognition of nuclear technology’s dual nature, countries regularly engage in “peaceful nuclear cooperation,” which Furhmann defines as “state-authorized transfer of technology, materials, or know-how intended to help the recipient country develop, successfully operate, or expand a civil nuclear program.” (2)



Matthew Furhmann, *Atomic Assistance: How "Atoms for Peace" Programs Cause Nuclear Insecurity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). 319pgs. \$82.95

His book discusses the use of economic statecraft to achieve foreign policy objectives and the ways in which attempts to influence the behavior of other states can have unintended consequences for international security. (239) Furhmann’s work covers an important topic in the twenty-first century, that is, it makes a contribution toward our understanding of the causes and effects of atomic peaceful nuclear assistance. But, most importantly, Furhmann’s main contribution to the existing literature on nuclear proliferation is the fact his book is the first of its kind to “explore the supply side of the nuclear proliferation.” (6) Furthermore, the book emphasizes the proliferation potential of peaceful nuclear assistance—as opposed to indigenously acquired nuclear capabilities or deliberate proliferation assistance. (6)

Furhmann’s *Atomic Assistance* is guided by the following research questions: Why do nuclear suppliers provide peaceful nuclear assistance to other countries? Does peaceful nuclear assistance raise the likelihood of nuclear weapons proliferation? Have international institutions influenced the nuclear marketplace and effectively separated the peaceful and military uses of the atom?

In reply, he argues peaceful nuclear cooperation warrants special reflection for at least two reasons. First, policy-makers believe civilian nuclear assistance can transform bilateral relationships. This transformation can be for better or worse depending on the country which is receiving the peaceful nuclear cooperation. Furhmann contends that countries receiving higher levels of peaceful nuclear cooperation are more likely to pursue and acquire the bomb, especially if they experience an international crisis after receiving aid.

Second, the proliferation potential of nuclear technology makes atomic assistance a unique tool of economic statecraft. In other words,

Fuhrmann argues nuclear peaceful cooperation “is simultaneously helpful and potentially dangerous for international security.” (5) Since nuclear peaceful proliferation could have a detrimental impact on world stability, policymakers in the United States and elsewhere who are concerned about proliferation need to understand the connection between civilian and military nuclear programs.

Fuhrmann draws on several cases of “Atoms for Peace” in the book. Some of the cases include US civilian nuclear assistance to Iran from 1957 to 1979, prior to the Iranian Revolution which brought to power the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ruhollah Mūsavi Khomeini; the Brazilian nuclear exports to Iran from 1975 to 1981; Brazilian and German nuclear agreements to build Angra III in 1975; and the controversial US nuclear cooperation agreement with India from 2001 to 2008.

As former President George W. Bush put it, US-Indian nuclear cooperation would “deepen the ties of commerce and friendship between our two nations.” (104-105) The nuclear peaceful agreement between the United States and India also raised concerns for neighboring Pakistan and China. For Pakistan, a nuclear India is unacceptable, but China is seen by India as a constant irritant and a rising influence in Asia.

Brazil and Iraq signed a peaceful nuclear agreement in January 1980. This agreement required Brazil to provide technology for uranium exploration and to train Iraqi scientists. Furthermore, the agreement specified Brazil would supply unprocessed and enriched uranium and offer assistance in the construction of nuclear reactors. (112) While such an agreement had tremendous ramifications for Brazil’s role in the international system, it was a zero-sum game for which Brazil could not escape. At the time the nuclear agreement was signed, Brazil imported roughly 80 percent of its oil and Iraq provided 40 percent. Therefore, Fuhrmann argues, Brazil “aiding the Iraqi civilian nuclear program could help Brazil secure a stable oil supply” and “Brazil’s thirst for oil made it difficult to say no to Iraqi requests for nuclear assistance.” (114) The Brazil-Germany agreement was heavily criticized by the United States as “a reckless move that could set off a nuclear arms race in Latin America, trigger the nuclear arming of a half-dozen nations elsewhere and endanger the security of the United States and the world as a whole.” (119)

Both Thomas M. Nichols’ *No Use: Nuclear Weapons and US National Security* and Matthew Fuhrmann’s *Atomic Assistance: How “Atoms for Peace” Programs Cause Nuclear Insecurity* are highly recommended. Given present-day attempts by rogue nations to pursue their dreams of possessing nuclear weapons for deterrence or for legitimate purposes, as it is often claimed, nuclear discussions once again are dominating the political debate by political experts and pundits alike. North Korea’s recent launching of a satellite into orbit has been seen as “a cover for testing a long-range missile, and the test of a nuclear device, the fourth such, which took place on January 6th.”⁴ US Secretary of State John Kerry condemned North Korea’s actions as “reckless and dangerous,” and other nations at the UN Security Council called North Korea’s actions

4 “China, North Korea, and America: Between Punxsutawney and Pyongyang,” *The Economist* (February 13-19, 2016): 33-34

irresponsible. The international community has been unable to prevent North Korea's continual misbehavior.

Furhmann eloquently points out that, despite the establishment of the Nonproliferation Treaty of 1968 and other nuclear safeguards, international institutions have had a limited effect in reducing the dangers of atomic assistance for nuclear weapons proliferation. (207) Therefore, it is no surprise that the nuclear debate continues into the twenty-first century.