Lawrence S. Wittmer is candid about the challenges facing the global nuclear abolition movement in the 21st century. He acknowledges, for example, that the end of the Cold War deprived the movement of its urgency and momentum, and that globalization then entwined it with other noteworthy but distracting causes. And yet, despite movement-sapping developments such as these, Wittmer is convinced that his fellow abolitionists will once again harness public opinion to support a wider eradication movement.

Others disagree, of course. In ‘The Illogic of Zero’, for example, Bruno Tertrais argues that “the intellectual and political movement in favor of abolition suffers from unconvincing rationales, inherent contradictions and unrealistic expectations” for success. As a result, a nuclear weapons-free world is not just an illogical goal, it is a dangerous one.

**In making his argument...**

Tertrais confronts three core abolitionist arguments head on. First, he rejects the claim that the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) mandates a legal commitment to abolish nuclear weapons as a *quid pro quo* for non-proliferation. Not so, Tertrais responds. Article VI of the treaty merely encourages states to “pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race.” The obligation, in other words, is to discuss future disarmament; it is not to commit to the complete abolition of nuclear weapons.

Second, Tertrais rejects the abolitionists’ belief that long-range conventional weapons have become sufficiently effective over the last 20 years to substitute for nuclear weapons in a deterrence role. To Tertrais, such an argument is simplistic and misses the point. Conventional technologies have improved, but would they deter rising regional powers such as China? In Tertrais’ view, conventional weapons lack the credibility of nuclear ones, with their overwhelming instantaneity, massive impact and long-term effects – attributes that Tertrais believes explain the absence of war among the major powers over the past 65 or so years.

The final windmill that Tertrais attacks is the abolitionists’ belief that the risks posed by nuclear proliferation or possible accidents or acts of terrorism are so great that removing the sources of the threat becomes the default option. Are these threats indeed probable, Tertrais asks, or are they mere examples of a problem shared by most advocacy groups – i.e., a penchant for systematic threat inflation?
Inherent Contradictions

In addition to the above concerns, Tertrais remains skeptical that unilateral attempts to “get to zero” would inevitably inspire the likes of Iran and North Korea to follow suit, or to encourage non-aligned countries such as Brazil and South Africa to subscribe to new and enhanced nonproliferation regimes. Am I mistaken, Tertrais asks, or did the massive post-1991 reductions in nuclear arsenals do little to dampen the emerging nuclear powers’ enthusiasm for acquiring weapons and know-how? In fact, isn’t the dampening effect most likely to occur where it shouldn’t – i.e., might it not become more difficult to maintain the highly trained cadre needed to operate and safeguard nuclear weapon stockpiles effectively? If so, then the risk of nuclear incidents may increase as ‘nuclear cultures’ are left to decay and the art and science of decommissioning weapons becomes increasingly lost.

Mission Impossible?

Finally, Tertrais remains convinced that the nuclear abolition movement does not sufficiently acknowledge 1) the allure nuclear weapons have for certain status-hungry nations, 2) the capacity such weapons have to negate Western conventional military superiority, and 3) the potential utility they have either to realign longstanding regional and geopolitical disputes or to stabilize them.

Given the above attractions of nuclear weapons (and more), how might abolitionists then make their “back to zero” case more effectively? Tertrais, of all people, hints at some possibilities. First, agitating for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and a Verifiable Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty could curtail added nuclear competition. Second, campaigning to expand the United Nations Security Council, to include a cadre of new anti-nuclear members, might be an option. Finally, it might be possible to ‘un-invent’ nuclear weapons –i.e., although deliberately trying to hollow out nuclear know-how does pose very significant risks, becoming increasingly incapable of stockpile maintenance and use (through diminished funding, for example) could serve as a form of arms abolition by other means.

By closing with the above suggestions, Tertrais seems to be acknowledging, at least in a backhanded way, that the goal of “getting back to zero” is actually a noteworthy one. However, given all the alleged sins we’ve just described, he also concludes that the abolition movement does lack a cohesive and sophisticated enough overall strategy to advance the cause of a nuclear weapons-free world. Until it develops one, he concludes, “getting back to zero” is neither desirable nor feasible.

‘The Illogic of Zero’ by Bruno Tertrais was published by The Washington Quarterly, 33:2, April 2010. The full article can be accessed here.

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