

Searching Anew for the Path to Peace: Some Questions and Fragments*

“We all have opinions. We all agree that other people have a right to their own opinions. We even agree that they can try to change our opinions, and march around with banners in the streets.

*But how do ideas and opinions change? How can opinions actually have effect—upon politics, upon power?” E.P Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers: Writings on War, Past and Future*, 1985.¹*

Prospects for disarmament are going in the wrong direction. Tensions among nuclear-armed states are on the rise. All of the nuclear-armed countries are modernizing their nuclear arsenals. They also are engaging in broad spectrum conventional arms racing that makes confrontation among nuclear-armed militaries more dangerous.

Despite this, there are no mass movements for nuclear disarmament in any of the nuclear-armed states. So I think it is worthwhile to pause, to assess our approaches to disarmament work and the challenges we face. I will be providing more questions than answers. My hope is perhaps to shake loose some new thinking.

I have chosen a few common approaches and arguments to talk about. One theme runs throughout. How do we understand how cause and effect works in society? How do we understand what is driving arms racing and the risk of war among nuclear-armed countries? How will we build enough collective power to do something about it, and to make progress towards the kind of world in which abolition of nuclear weapons is possible?

This exercise may not feel very uplifting. So perhaps bear in mind the old maxim “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.”²

The first approach I want to consider is The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The Treaty was a considerable achievement, perhaps the best that could be accomplished, given the circumstances. But the circumstances included the absence of mass movements for disarmament, and most of all the absence of significant disarmament movements in the nuclear armed states. Now that the TPNW is a reality, we need to think anew about the kind of role it might play.

The first thing to note is that for the most part treaties are not causes of major changes of government policy. Rather, they are effects. They mark decisions already made by governments, bargains that governments have chosen to accept. Treaties are unlikely to play a causal role in building the support needed to bring about major social change. Before you can persuade people to care about a treaty to abolish nuclear weapons, they have to have reasons to care about nuclear weapons.

The second thing to note is that words on paper aren’t enough.

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Much discussion around the TPNW focuses on developing the norm against possession and use of nuclear weapons. What does it take to make a normative vision a legal reality? Legal historian Robert Cover wrote that

“The creation of legal meaning cannot take place in silence. But neither can it take place without the committed action that distinguishes law from literature...”³

Thinking about the commitment necessary to incarnate a normative vision helps us to understand the nature of the task.

This relationship between law and commitment is worth thinking about on several levels. It is a way to think about what it means for a country to join the TPNW. It also is a way to think about what it means for a town or city to take some kind of action on nuclear disarmament, such as a statement supporting the Treaty.

The less concrete the action you demand, the less risk there is for the decision makers involved. Hence the less commitment is required -- both on the part of those making the decisions and on the part of those making the demands.

It's relatively easy to get a liberal city to pass a resolution endorsing a disarmament treaty the city itself has no power to join. It's hard to get even a liberal city to take concrete action to stop weapons factories or deployments that might bring their city money and jobs.

And there's no guarantee that the easy “gets,” the low hanging fruit, of politics lead to anything more substantial. Paying lip service, performative acts that cater to one or another constituency with little commitment or cost, are a large part of what politicians do.

The more concrete the commitment we ask of a government, the more collective power we must organize to obtain it. Intermediate goals that don't require us to organize more broadly, to extend our reach and build new alliances, don't take us very far if our goals require substantial change in the order of things.

At the national level, the degree of commitment manifested by joining the TPNW differs greatly depending on a state's relationship with nuclear weapons. It's relatively easy to get a country that already has foresworn nuclear weapons to join a nuclear disarmament treaty. It is much, much harder to get a nuclear armed government to decide to join a treaty that requires them to eliminate their nuclear arsenal.

The level of commitment that would be demonstrated by a nuclear armed country joining the TPNW would be very high. So too would the level of commitment, the mobilization of social power in their population, needed to make it happen.

I was looking back at some issues of the Journal of European Nuclear Disarmament, to remind myself about the size of the Cold War era disarmament movements. In Germany alone, by 1985 there were estimated to be around 4,000 local peace groups.⁴ More than 5 million people, about 8% of the total population, had signed appeals protesting NATO's planned

deployment of nuclear-armed missiles in Europe.⁵ 8% of the U.S. population today would be about 26 million people.

The European peace movements likely played a role in bringing about the INF Treaty, ending the deployment of particularly dangerous intermediate range missiles deployed by the United States and the Soviet Union. And those movements may have played some role in bringing an end to the Cold War and in reducing war risk.

These were no small achievements. Yet those movements, plus similar movements across the U.S. and the world, were not enough to impel the nuclear-armed states to engage in serious negotiations to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. The huge movements in Europe were not enough to cause the removal of all U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe even after the end of the Cold War, where they remain deployed today. And both France and Great Britain still have substantial nuclear arsenals as well.

All of this suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for nuclear disarmament work. And it also gives us an idea of the magnitude of the task before us. Reducing the risk of war and moving towards a world without nuclear weapons likely will require broad, sustained social movements. We will need to make connections with people working on other aspects of building a more fair, democratic, and sustainable society.

One set of approaches long used by anti-war and disarmament activists to build connections with other struggles focuses on military spending and the economic power of the military industrial complex. It is worth re-examining this approach in light of the changing role of the military and the arms industries in the economy.

Perhaps the most common tactic for this is “guns vs. butter” arguments, comparing the costs of war and preparation for war to other forms of public spending. Regarding the guns vs. butter arguments, one question we should be asking is: why haven’t they worked?

Over the decades, there has been a lot of excellent work done documenting the costs of war and preparation for war. There also are lots of smart people working in movements and organizations that advocate for more resources to serve human needs like health care, education, and housing. If there really is a huge pool of public money out there, and if it is reasonably possible to move that money from military spending to human needs, why haven’t more of those organizations taken up the call to do so?

One possible answer is that those organization understand that it is really hard to cut military spending. And there likely are easier pots of money to go after.

--A very modest financial transactions tax, sufficiently mainstream to have been included in a Congressional Budget Office list of revenue options, would raise more than \$70 billion per year—more than the estimated annual cost of maintaining and modernizing the U.S. nuclear arsenal.⁶

--The Trump tax cuts were a political choice the resulted in an annual loss of revenue estimated at \$275 billion—over a third of the military budget.⁷

Which is easier to imagine: reversing the Trump tax cuts or cutting the military budget by a third?

Why is it so hard to cut military spending? One answer commonly given is the economic power of the military-industrial complex. But by most measures, the purely economic power of the military and the arms industry has declined significantly from its Cold War peaks.

From the 1970s onward, military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product trended steadily downward, reaching a low of about 3 percent in the late 1990s. The military budget increased significantly in the 2000s. But it still has not approached peak Cold War shares of the U.S. economy. Reductions of the military budget during the 1990s were accompanied by a consolidation in the arms industry, and also by several rounds of closures of U.S. domestic military bases.⁸ Both reduced the pervasive geographic and economic presence of the military and the arms industry. The Defense Department's role in science and technology research and development also has declined since the Cold War.⁹ And regarding the cruder ways economic power translates into political power, like lobbying and campaign expenditures, the arms sector does not appear to rank anywhere near the top.

The immense U.S. military establishment clearly serves, and is supported politically, by a far greater array of deeply rooted interests than the military industrial complex. We need to understand the full range of forces in the U.S. and elsewhere that is driving the resurgence of arms racing and confrontation among nuclear-armed countries.

A key to mobilizing for peace and disarmament in this moment is educating publics about the renewed danger of nuclear war. Most important is that we try to understand the dynamics of the global economic and political system *right now*.

E.P. Thompson, a historian and one the founders of European Nuclear Disarmament, warned against understanding the present through easy analogies with the past. He was writing in the depths of the Cold war. Then, politicians and ideologists both East and West invoked the image of the Nazis to paint their adversaries as dangerous aggressors and any "appeasement" as fatal error. "It is a compelling identification," Thompson wrote. "Yet it rests on the assent of memory rather than upon analysis or evidence. It appears plausible simply because it looks so familiar."¹⁰

This time around, it is the Cold War rivalry that provides the familiar, and powerful, imagery with which to portray the present. And it is just as important today to avoid skipping over the difficult analysis for the easy trope.

To be sure, mainstream commentators and government officials are providing ample fodder for the "New Cold War" discourse. And the main antagonists once more are the old Cold War adversaries, The U.S., Russia and China. But arguing within the Cold War frame -- even by saying No New Cold War! -- I believe helps to reinforce that frame. And it obscures the actual

nature of the new, and likely very dangerous, confrontations among nuclear-armed governments and their militaries.

Cold War analogies push propaganda buttons wired long ago. They add resonance to the rhetoric from the Right that China and Russia are “communist” states—which neither really are today. Cold War analogies reinforce the message from the national security establishment that this new confrontation once again is a collision between starkly different ways of ordering the economy, and the relation of the economy to the State. But what we really have now is a competition within one system, a struggle for ascendance in a global capitalism that now encompasses the entire planet.

To understand this new round of great power competition, we also need to do more than say “its imperialism,” a term that too often now has little more analytical content than “stuff the U.S. and its allies do that we don’t like.”

Some key potential flashpoints also are not easily understood through a simple anti-imperialist lens. This is so even where the boundaries and political units involved are in significant ways legacies of colonialism—for example, Taiwan, or India and Pakistan.

Traditionally, imperialism was understood as a form of competition rooted in the dynamics of the global capitalist system.¹¹ Today, here in the U.S., I seldom see discussion of imperialism as a competitive system. This is so despite the fact that there are no major powers left that are not thoroughly enmeshed in global capitalist markets, and in the forms of competition that entails.

This competition is taking new forms, under new conditions. Unprecedented ecological stresses are driving conflict both within and among countries. With the entire world now part of the global capitalist circuit of trade and investment, there are fewer opportunities for the “accumulation by dispossession”¹² available to competing states that characterized past forms of colonialism and imperialism.

Nationalisms also are playing a greater role in today’s great power antagonisms than they did during the Cold war. We are seeing resurgent “blood and soil” nationalisms, not just in the United States but in many countries.

And with the Biden administration we might be seeing not a return to liberal internationalism, but a new liberal nationalism. It has strands of the U.S. as a “nation of immigrants,” resonances of the New Deal, restoration of U.S. technological supremacy, and the rule of law—with a strong emphasis on the kinds of law that protects U.S. markets and foreign investment.

Nationalist competition will be intensified by conflating economic issues with “national security” challenges. Competition with China for economic dominance will play out on such terrain as intellectual property protection, technology standards, and the flow of digital information, all portrayed as central to the “security” threat presented by a rising China and a resurgent Russia.

Understanding how nationalisms are formed and manipulated as elements of strategies of rule is particularly important in this moment. Nationalisms also are where the effects of foreign policy are most likely to resonate at home, erupting as discrimination and violence against immigrants and other vulnerable communities. This is one of the places that peace movements and the new movements emerging from the communities on the front line here at home intersect.

If I thought that disarmament progress depended only on the people and organizations currently working for disarmament I would long since have given up hope. But it doesn't, and it never has.

I believe all work that strives to bend the arc towards justice, towards a world that is more fair, more democratic, and more ecologically sustainable, also reduces the risk of war. Peace movements have been most successful in moments when they were immersed in broader, deeper movements challenging a violent, inequitable, unsustainable status quo.

And we are in a time of growing new movements. Recently, Amna Akbar, a law professor whose work focuses on the emerging social movements, wrote

“We are living in a time of grassroots demands to transform our built environment and our relationships with one another and the earth. To abolish prisons and police, rent, debt, borders, and billionaires. To decommodify housing and healthcare and to decolonize land. To exercise more collective ownership over our collectively generated wealth. Some of us are reimagining the state. Others are dreaming of moving beyond it. But these are more than dreams. These are demands for a democratic political economy.”¹³

Peace, an end to war and militarism, is the piece that is still missing from that list of demands.

Our challenge is to be able to understand our place in among these new movements, to be able to explain to ourselves and our potential allies why, in this moment, we all are part of the same struggle.

¹ E.P Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers: Writings on War, Past and Future* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p.3.

² Antonio Gramsci. *Letters from Prison*(New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) p.299.

³ Robert M. Cover, “Nomos and Narrative” (1983) 97 *Harv. L. Rev.* 4, 49.

⁴ “By 1985 there were altogether around 4,000 local peace groups; Hamburg alone has an estimated 300 separate peace organizations.” Peter Findlay, “Inside the protean peace movement,” *END: Journal of European Nuclear Disarmament*, No.20, February March 196, p.14.

⁵ “The level of support for the aims of the movement was high: more than five million people (some 8 percent of the total population) had signed the 'Kredfeld Appeal' or similar appeals and manifestos protesting against Nato's planned missile deployments....” Peter Findlay, “Inside the protean peace movement,” *END: Journal of European Nuclear Disarmament*, No.20, February March 196, p.13.

⁶ Congressional Budget Office, “Impose a Tax on Financial Transactions,” Options for Reducing the Deficit: 2017 to 2026, Revenues Option 41, December 8, 2016, <https://www.cbo.gov/budget-options/2016/52287>. The CBO

estimate is based on a financial transactions tax of .1 percent of security value. The \$70 billion per year revenue estimate is conservative; the CBO estimates that it would take several years of market adjustment for revenues from the tax to stabilize at around \$100 billion or more per annually.

“If carried out, the plans for nuclear forces delineated in the Department of Defense’s (DoD’s) and the Department of Energy’s (DOE’s) fiscal year 2019 budget requests would cost a total of \$494 billion over the 2019–2028 period, for an average of just under \$50 billion a year, CBO estimates.” Congressional Budget Office, “Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2019 to 2028,” January, 2019, p.1.

⁷ See William G. Gale and Aaron Krupkin, “Did the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act Pay for Itself in 2018?” Tax Policy Center, *Tax Vox*, March 13, 2019 <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxvox/did-tax-cuts-and-jobs-act-pay-itself-2018>

⁸ The consolidation of the U.S. arms industry began during the Cold War, one effect of the trend towards fewer, more complex and capable weapons systems, and accelerated after the fall of the Soviet Union. See Tarja Cronberg, Anders Aeroe, and Eric Seem, *Technological Powers in Transition: Defense Conversion in Russia and the U.S. 1991-1994* (Copenhagen: Afademisk Forlag A/S, 1996) pp.94 et seq.

⁹ “A workforce with robust science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) capabilities is critical to sustaining U.S. preeminence. Today, however, the activities of the Department of Defense (DOD) devoted to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are a small and diminishing part of the nation’s overall science and engineering enterprise. One consequence is that DOD cannot significantly impact the nation’s overall STEM workforce—and therefore, with a few exceptions, DOD should focus its limited resources on fulfilling its own special requirements for STEM talent.” Committee on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Workforce Needs for the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Defense Industrial Base; Division on Engineering and Physical Sciences; Board on Higher Education and Workforce; Policy and Global Affairs; National Academy of Engineering; National Research Council, *Assuring the U.S. Department of Defense a Strong Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Workforce* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2012), p.1.

¹⁰ E.P. Thompson, *Beyond the Cold War*, 9.

¹¹ There is worthwhile work on this theme in academia, and more discussion about it outside the United States. But very little has diffused into U.S. activist discourse about the forces driving high-tech militarism and war risk.

¹² See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.137 et.seq.

¹³ Amna A. Akbar, “Demands for a Democratic Political Economy,” 134 *Harv. L. Rev. F.* 90, 90-91 (2020).