

Looking forward, looking backward: World War I, today's risk of great power war, and nuclear disarmament.

*by Andrew Lichterman**

We are meeting here in the middle of the preparatory committee meetings for the 2015 review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, in the year that is the centenary of the outbreak of World War I. Yet despite news stories everyday about rising tensions among nuclear-armed great powers, I have heard no mention of World War I and its resonances and little mention of the risk of great power war today. The one event that I attended where the risk of war was a dominant theme was the launch of a book by a prominent retired diplomat, still active in disarmament circles. He declared with considerable certainty that the risk of war among the most powerful states was a thing of the past, and that we enjoy today unprecedented opportunities for peace. Acknowledgement that war among nuclear-armed great powers might be a significant danger only is beginning to creep in again at the margins, due to the headlines from Ukraine.

The risk of war between nuclear-armed great powers, and particularly involving the nuclear-armed adversaries of the Cold War era, has been largely absent from arms control and disarmament discourse for two decades. Nuclear weapons often are represented as dangerous anachronisms whose continued presence is almost inexplicable, or at most as driven by the narrow pecuniary interests of arms contractors. Yet we are in a moment characterized by the rise of new economic powers and the relative decline of old ones. In the past, these have been the times when great power wars occurred. As one international relations theorist put it,

“Crisis scholars observe a critical fact: states often accept high risks of inadvertent war when initiating crises in order to mitigate an otherwise exogenous decline in power.”¹

At the same time, countries with the most powerful militaries still deploy nuclear arsenals large enough to destroy most of human civilization and to do catastrophic, long-lasting damage to the environment. No nuclear armed state has proposed any disarmament plan that would bring nuclear stockpiles down below country-destroying numbers any time in the foreseeable future. All the nuclear-armed countries are modernizing their nuclear arsenals to a greater or lesser degree. The United States has plans to modernize its nuclear weapons and the facilities that produce them so that they will last past the middle of the 21st century. Those who believe that the risk of nuclear catastrophe resulting from wars among the most powerful states is a thing of the past must, then, feel confident predicting history a quarter or a half century out—something that has never proved terribly successful.

While thinking about these issues over the past few years, I have asked a number of peace and disarmament activists whether they thought great power war, and in particular wars

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between nuclear-armed powers, was a significant risk in the coming decades. It was hard to find people who appeared to have given much thought to the matter, and those that have generally discount the dangers. When pressed for reasons, responses fell into three general categories (with various combinations of these themes). These themes also were common in what mainstream discourse there is about such things (at least up to the recent Ukraine crisis).

Perhaps most common is that the global economy is now so integrated that the elites of great powers would avoid highly destructive wars among them, and particularly the use of nuclear weapons. It should be noted this outlook was also common in the years immediately before WWI, the best known example being the work of Norman Angell, and that Germany and the United Kingdom were leading trading partners at the outset of World War I. A second theme was that the United States still is far more powerful militarily than any other country, and can be expected to remain so for the foreseeable future; no country would risk an all-out conflict with it. Few seemed to focus on what elites in the United States might be willing to risk as their relative power declines in decades to come.

The third response—partially implicit in the first two, and seldom fully articulated by peace and disarmament activists for obvious reasons—is a belief that no country really would risk nuclear warfare, that nuclear deterrence in some sense “works.” This is a troubling stance for people and movements committed to disarmament, and if left unexamined, a latent contradiction that impedes clarity of thought.

At the more elite end of arms control and disarmament discourse, it also is fashionable to imply that this time around ruling elites are more capable and rational, and that the relative rise and decline of the leading economic and military powers can be successfully “managed.” I would note parenthetically that these views issue from the same institutional and cultural milieu that produced the vision of the “end of history” after the Cold War, and in which legions of experts assured us—before 2007—that modern economic management had made systemic financial crashes, and deep, long-lasting financial crises a thing of the past.

These kinds of responses also suggest an accommodation, even if only for lack of imaginable alternatives, with a future that is no more fair or democratic than the present, and likely far less so. It would be a world in which great power war perhaps could be avoided, but only at the cost of a kind of power cartel that is likely to turn the world outside the developed core into a free fire zone—and the world inside it into a confederation of police states. The accelerating disappearance of any world both socially and ecologically “outside” the global capitalist system—heretofore a prime requisite for its development—already is causing a kind of internal re-colonization, a turning back of the voracious, destructive energies of the immense organizations that dominate global economic and social life on the societies that spawned them. The result has been an intensifying wave of upward wealth redistribution and domestic authoritarianism and militarism in the old capitalist core. The extension of a system that requires endless growth to the entire planet also has accelerated the deterioration of the ecosystems we all depend on.

All of this is provoking widespread resistance and unrest that so far is largely inchoate, but certainly is likely to intensify. In international relations theory, the main form of social

science that manages to filter into arms control and disarmament discourse, class conflict and social movements tend to be treated as an external factors, rather than systematically taken into account. But these kinds of factors also play a role in the likelihood of great power war. The ability of elites to sustain their wealth and power in a way that they find satisfactory can be threatened from within as well as without, often at the same time. And again, the kinds of elites who control states and militaries in the past have been prone to confrontation and risk taking at times when they have seen no clear alternatives for sustaining their power.

Ceding wealth and political power to the rest of society never has been a solution freely chosen by ruling classes. Contemporary analysts of late 19th and early 20th century imperialism saw it as in part a political choice, a set of policies aimed at securing markets for expanded production without the reforms and redistribution of wealth needed for further development of domestic economies to better serve the entire population.² Europe's ruling elites found themselves faced with the difficulties of sustaining their particular projects of national expansion in the face of intensifying competition in a globalized circuit of trade and investment, but at the same time saw the democratic potential of broad-based internal development as a potential threat to their power.

The result was great disparities of wealth and restive populations. This provided fertile ground for both popular uprisings and for authoritarian nationalisms. The later were nurtured and exploited by ruling elites both at home and in pursuit of geopolitical agendas inside Europe itself. The historian Sandra Halperin wrote observed that

“In Europe, the maldistribution of taxes and income and the monopolization of economic resources and opportunities created a social structure of accumulation that was so distorted from a welfare point of view that it ran into ever-recurring bottlenecks and became socially and politically intolerable. By 1914, monopoly, poor use of resources, maldistribution of income, and inequitable tax systems had combined to produce a crisis in Europe.”³

Europe's elites found the politics of war posturing and then war itself provided the opportunity for a decisive break with an increasingly intractable present, even if it launched them into an unknowable future. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm,

“They were the years when wisps of violence hung in the English air, symptoms of a crisis in economy and society which the self-confident opulence of the architecture of Ritz hotels, pro-consular places, West End theatres, department stores and office blocks could not quite conceal. When the war came in 1914, it was not as a catastrophe which wrecked the stable bourgeois world, as the sudden death of the breadwinner wrecked the life of respectable families in Victorian novels. It came as a respite from crisis, a diversion, perhaps even as some sort of solution.”⁴

Gathering here in New York, the financial capital of another empire, amidst stark and growing disparities of wealth and wealth again celebrated and conspicuously displayed, it is hard not to hear faint echoes of that time. History does not repeat itself, but none of us should be comfortable with the resonances between that moment and our own.

Despite all of this, the risk of great power war has been largely absent from discussions of nuclear weapons for two decades, particularly in the United States. The 2012 U.S. Department of Defense Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy stated that "...[T]he international security environment has changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. The threat of global nuclear war has become remote, but the risk of nuclear attack has increased." That report also asserted that "[t]oday's most immediate and extreme danger remains nuclear terrorism," and that "[t]oday's other pressing threat is nuclear proliferation..."⁵

Many in the arms control and disarmament field have actively or passively accepted this view—that nuclear weapons that don't yet exist pose a greater threat than the thousands that do. Detailed discussion of the horrific effects of nuclear weapons abounds, discussion of the circumstances in which existing nuclear arsenals might be used is scarce. Discussion of the dangers of "accidental" nuclear war is more common than discussion of crisis miscalculation and the danger that modern high-tech warfare might escalate out of control—because the probability of war between states that possess the most advanced militaries and nuclear weapons has been virtually ruled out.

This is so despite extensive developments since the Cold War in non-nuclear weapons that make war among advanced militaries more complex. Powerful, accurate, stealthy long range strike systems face sophisticated air defenses and increasingly capable missile defenses, all in a fog of electronic countermeasures, jamming, and now cyberwarfare, operating at a pace that defies human comprehension. Nuclear war will not come out of the blue, but out of the failure to successfully "manage" all of this in a confrontation between high-tech militaries ultimately backed by nuclear weapons.

Nonetheless, the circumstances in which most of the world's nuclear weapons might actually be used have been consigned to the margins of public discussion of nuclear weapons. The result is a disarmament discourse that has become incoherent and ineffective. Particular nuclear weapons modernization programs are denounced on the grounds that they make nuclear weapons "more useable." At the same time, the larger disarmament discourse provides the public with little reason to see why blurring the threshold between conventional and nuclear warfare presents a significant danger. The possibility of war between the nuclear-armed adversaries of the Cold War period and the dangers of escalation from conventional to nuclear warfare instead too frequently has been swept into a rhetorical black box labeled "obsolete Cold War nuclear missions"—as if Russia, China, the United States and the nuclear-armed Europeans simply never could become antagonists again.

The absence of sustained discussion of the continuing risks of great power war in the nuclear age also has dampened reflection and discussion about the role and the interdependence of great power military-industrial complexes. In the United States, discussion of the dangers posed by the military industrial complex has been further undercut by mainstream arms control advocacy that accepts, or even endorses, substituting powerful, accurate, long-range conventional weapons systems for nuclear weapons. It is simply presumed without further analysis that this will "reduce the nuclear danger" and move in the direction of disarmament, despite the persistence of both military industrial complexes and nuclear arsenals still large

enough to destroy much of human civilization in short order. This kind of approach, together with the absence of discussion of the dangers of great power war, also largely severs the connection between nuclear arms control and discussion of the need for broader, and more ambitious, efforts to roll back high-tech arms development.

Portraying nuclear weapons as Cold War holdovers may at some particular times and places have made for effective advocacy. But half the duration of the Cold War after the Cold War, it does not contribute to our understanding of why nuclear weapons are still here in civilization-destroying numbers, of the circumstances in which they might be used, or of what must be done to get rid of them. There is a crucial difference between labeling nuclear weapons as Cold War anachronisms, and understanding them and the immense array of technologies and institutions generated in half a century of superpower confrontation as a legacy that profoundly shaped our present. As the E.P. Thompson wrote in 1985,

“It simply is not possible for a major economy to be inflected towards military priorities for some three decades (and more) without profound consequences in social, political, and ideological life.”⁶

Today we are a generation past Thompson’s time and further into the age of high-tech nuclear military aerospace industrial complexes. The military strategies, technology choices, and domestic political power strategies of each new stage of the military-industrial complex emerge out of the last. This process has become so immense and so naturalized that the way it constrains political imaginations and choices for the most part has become invisible.

Thompson, both a historian of labor and social movements and a leading disarmament activist of the Cold War period, also observed that

“If we do require a new category to define this distinct epoch of nuclear-confrontational history, yet it goes without saying that this does not, by some gesture of a wand, mean that all previous categories are dispensed with or all prior historical forces cease to be operative.... Imperialisms and class struggles, nationalisms and confrontations between publics and bureaucracies, will all operate with their customary vigour; they may continue to dominate this historical episode or that. It will mean, rather, that a new, featureless and threatening, figure has joined the *dramatis personae* of history, a figure that throws a more abrupt and darker shadow than any other. And that we are already within the shadow of that extreme danger.”⁷

We likely are entering a period when the prospects for disarmament will be diminishing, as the risk of confrontation and war increase. Calling this new round great power crisis and confrontation a “new Cold War” is, I think, a mistake, another label that obscures more than it reveals. Our task is to understand why the today’s ruling elites, under the particular conditions of *this* moment, are choosing the kinds of risk that have resulted in devastating wars in the past. And we must have a movement that is willing once more to ask the big questions: Can capitalism, a system of economies and states driven by endless competition among immense, authoritarian organizations avoid sliding into militarism and war? Does the problem go deeper—can a modernity dominated by organizations that treat both nature and society as a

series of objects to be manipulated and controlled via the tools of a one-sided, technical rationality avoid either war or the eventual destruction of the ecosphere we all depend on? As Lewis Mumford put it, “Is this association of inordinate power and productivity with equally inordinate violence and destruction a purely accidental one?”⁸

As a first step, we need a new way of talking about all this—one that recognizes fully that today there is little democracy anywhere, that we have an economy that is starkly two tier and growing more inequitable all the time, that decisions about war and peace in every country on earth are made by tiny elites who are largely unaccountable, and that the vast majority of humanity, and the planet itself, has no voice.

¹ Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), p.36.

² Sandra Halperin, *War and Social Change in Modern Europe: The Great Transformation Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.112.

³ Sandra Halperin, *War and Social Change in Modern Europe: The Great Transformation Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.267-268.

⁴ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), p.193.

⁵ “Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States – Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.,” U.S. Department of Defense, 12 June 2013, p.2

⁶ E.P. Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers: Writings on War, Past and Future* (London: Merlin Press, 1985), p.140.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers: Writings on War, Past and Future* (London: Merlin Press, 1985), p.138-139

⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*, New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1970, p. 257.