Facing the Reality of the Bomb

Reviewed by Barclay Ward

Better Safe Than Sorry: The Ironies of Living with the Bomb

By Michael Krepon


President Barack Obama's enlightened statement April 5 in Prague on the future of nuclear weapons raised the possibility that we are at a turning point in our long life with the atomic bomb. What we do now will depend a great deal on how much we have learned over these years. One of the uniquely important aspects of Michael Krepon's excellent book is that, among other things, it is a book about learning and forgetting.

Paul Nitze exemplifies the many decades we have spent on the learning curve. As Krepon notes, Nitze gave us NSC-68, the 1950 policy document that called for a long-term military buildup as a major component of the containment policy directed against the Soviet bloc. As a member of the Committee on the Present Danger, he was most critical of President Jimmy Carter's arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. In the end, however, Nitze came to favor abolition of nuclear weapons because he saw that a nuclear world is not in the national security interest of the United States. He was not alone, of course, as George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn have come to a similar conclusion in their well-known Wall Street Journal articles of 2007 and 2008.

Krepon reminds us that even before the nuclear age had gathered steam, Henry Stimson anticipated the dangers of a nuclear world and pushed for weapons controls. Our collective learning at that time lacked consensus and conviction. In 1946 the United States made a stab at trying to establish international control over nuclear energy through the Baruch Plan. The proposal called for a UN agency to oversee all development and use of nuclear energy. The United States would dispose of its stockpile and stop producing nuclear weapons, and there would be punishment that could not be thwarted by a Security Council veto for states that violated the plan's provisions. After the Soviets rejected the Baruch Plan, the United States and the world veered onto a different path.

Changes in thinking often have been propelled by specific, unsettling events. The 1949 Soviet test undoubtedly strengthened the hand of those who saw the need for large numbers of nuclear weapons, although a specific theory of deterrence was not publicly articulated until 1954. As our thinking evolved after the 1950s, our elaborate theorizing about nuclear doctrines became a type of intriguing parlor game, based not on experience but rather on an abstract, somewhat antiseptic logic that belonged more comfortably in the world of think tanks than in the real world. This is not a criticism because good and bright people did the best they could with imperfect knowledge, which always seemed to lead them to a strategy of "better safe than sorry." Consequently, this strategy led to the production of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons that, by luck, doctrinal design, and, in several instances, timely presidential restraint, have never been used.

The Cuban missile crisis in 1962 strengthened the hand of those who saw the value of moving in the direction of arms control. Even while the Cold War was beginning to melt in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, the United States and the Soviet Union were reaching some sweeping agreements. In particular, START I, which was signed in 1991, was the first treaty actually to reduce
strategic weapons, and the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty eliminated an entire class of delivery vehicles. In the story Krepon tells of our life with nuclear weapons, it is fitting that success in concluding the INF Treaty was due in large measure to Nitze's role as negotiator in the early stage. So, at that point in time, we were learning the right lessons.

In 2001 the United States seemed to stop learning and to start forgetting. Much is often made of the impact of the September 11 attacks on our thinking, but it is good to keep in mind that the decisive shift away from arms control and nonproliferation started before September 11, 2001. For example, the refusal by the Bush administration to resubmit the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) to the Senate for advice and consent, the clearly stated intention to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and the scuttling of the Biological Weapons Convention review conference all indicated the beginning of our forgetting. Krepon is right to highlight President George W. Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy as the clearest statement of the new direction, which emphasized military force over diplomacy and pushed the concept of preemptive war into the category of preventive war. Fifty-one paragraphs of the paper dealt with military issues, with only a few sentences devoted to diplomatic capabilities.

As an example of this worldview, Krepon cites the columnist Charles Krauthammer, a "gifted polemicist," who called for a rejection of "pseudo-multilateralism" in which a great power essentially acts alone while seeking the blessings of others. In this fantasy world, the thing that counted most was a muscular pursuit of U.S. objectives that were often narrowly defined and sometimes illusory. Any restraint on U.S. actions was regarded as unacceptable. Treaties were suspect. Multilateral treaties were considered the most disagreeable because, in negotiating and implementing them, the United States might have to take into account many points of view different from its own. The unipolar moment had apparently arrived. American exceptionalism had reached new heights.

Many areas of U.S. foreign policy suffered, but probably none more than nuclear nonproliferation. Fundamental principles of the nonproliferation regime were undermined by an acceptance of selective proliferation. The nuclear cooperation agreement with India, which awarded India all the benefits but none of the duties of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), was concluded without any evident concern by the Bush administration that global and well-established nonproliferation principles were being contradicted. The irony of this absurd situation was that the United States had taken the lead in the early 1990s in working hard to persuade the other members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group that full-scope safeguards, under which a country opens all its nuclear facilities to international inspections, should be required for significant, new nuclear exports to non-nuclear-weapon states. For the first time since 1978, there was no presidential affirmation of U.S. negative security assurances, the commitment not to attack or threaten to attack with nuclear weapons any non-nuclear-weapon state bound by treaty not to acquire nuclear weapons. The train wreck of the 2005 NPT Review Conference was due partly to the Egyptians' obstructive behavior, but also to anemic U.S. diplomacy preceding the conference and underpowered U.S. leadership during the meeting. (The U.S. delegation in 2005 was headed by an assistant secretary, the lowest-ranking official to lead any U.S. delegation in the history of the NPT.) U.S. support for the NPT had reached the level of indifference.

To be fair, the Bush administration launched a few good counterproliferation initiatives. For example, the Proliferation Security Initiative began under Bush; and more importantly, his administration pushed through UN Security Council Resolution 1540. That resolution, by invoking the UN Charter's Chapter VII, which deals with threats to international peace and security, requires states to take measures to prevent illegal trafficking of materials related to weapons of mass destruction. The principal problem was that counterproliferation tended to be seen in the Bush administration largely as a substitute for, not a complement to, nonproliferation. After Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice regained some of her realist principles, the United States belatedly took up serious diplomacy with North Korea in the six-party talks and, as Krepon points out, made considerably more progress than it did by trying to isolate and rhetorically rough up the North Koreans. On balance, though, the mixed bag of actions from 2001 to 2009 or, in some cases, the absence of them was decidedly negative. The result was a weakening of the "load bearing walls" of the nonproliferation regime, to use Krepon's term.

Now we have another chance to get it right-more than a chance, a compelling need.
Krepon defines the post-Cold War period as the "second nuclear age." His nightmare list of threats in the second nuclear age, with Iran's nuclear program at the top, is as good as any. Regardless of how one ranks them, though, the world undoubtedly is facing a host of multidimensional threats that includes both states and nonstate actors.

Krepon effectively dismisses the naive notion that the United States can achieve real nuclear security through dominance and argues persuasively for a comprehensive approach to vertical as well as horizontal proliferation. (Vertical proliferation refers to the arms race among nuclear-weapon states; horizontal proliferation refers to the spread of nuclear weapons to formerly non-nuclear-weapon states.) Krepon is quite right to use the two terms together because doing so focuses attention on the central issue of increasing numbers of nuclear weapons, whether in the hands of declared nuclear-weapon states or others.

The comprehensive approach to proliferation he recommends has five principal components: deterrence, military strength, containment, diplomatic engagement, and what he sees as a new form of arms control that stresses cooperative threat reduction. None of these components is new, and although diplomatic engagement from 2001 to 2009 was spotty at best, none entirely disappeared during the Bush years. For example, although initially underfunded in the Bush administration, cooperative threat reduction continued in the states of the former Soviet Union. The key is balance, and in this regard, Krepon's comprehensive approach differs markedly from the one the United States followed during the last eight years.

It would be difficult to disagree with Krepon's argument for a broadly construed concept of arms control that emphasizes cooperative efforts, but one should not at the same time discount the importance, even urgency, of traditional disarmament negotiations. The Bush administration's nonchalant approach to strategic arms control will, if a new agreement is not negotiated before START I expires in December, leave us with one weak agreement on the books, the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, and no verification. Moreover, with 95 percent of the world's nuclear weapons in U.S. and Russian hands, the United States and Russia have a big task ahead of them. On April 1, Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev committed themselves to a strong, forward-looking agenda. Notwithstanding the desirability of a broad approach to arms control, old-fashioned negotiations on reductions are still very much needed. Also worthy of serious attention is the question of how, at an appropriate time, the other declared and de facto nuclear-weapon states can be brought into negotiations. Given the widely divergent structures of nuclear forces and strategies among the other nuclear states, this objective could be extremely challenging.

Nonproliferation is an area badly in need of repair. When the NPT parties agreed in 1995 to extend the duration of the treaty indefinitely, they also committed themselves to conclude a comprehensive test ban and negotiate a fissile material cutoff treaty (FMCT). Obama has made clear that he will seek CTBT ratification. If common sense prevails, the Senate will do what it failed to do in 1999 by voting for CTBT ratification, but the fight will probably be bruising. Now that the Obama administration has given up the laughable position adopted in 2004 by the Bush administration that an FMCT cannot and, indeed, need not be verified, there is a new opportunity to press ahead with realistic negotiations. Negotiating an FMCT, however, is likely to be a long, tough slog through the arcane complexities of the 65-state Conference on Disarmament. The final preparatory committee meeting for the 2010 NPT Review Conference recently concluded in a relatively positive atmosphere and with an agenda adopted for the review conference, a sharp contrast to 2004. Nonetheless, it will be necessary to launch a major campaign of diplomatic consultations with other NPT parties over the next year if there is to be a realistic hope of a successful review conference next May. The NPT cannot afford a repeat of 2005. Such a campaign would fit neatly with Krepon's call for diplomatic engagement. With the Obama administration's appointment of superb arms control and nonproliferation leadership in the White House and Department of State, the United States is well positioned to initiate sustained, robust diplomacy.

The agenda is daunting. There is an overflowing basket of new and old nonproliferation issues. The list includes strengthening International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards; preventing or dismantling proliferation networks, represented lately by Pakistan's Abdul Qadeer Khan; securing fissile material; ending illicit trafficking of nuclear material; and establishing international controls on
the nuclear fuel cycle. Some of these issues surfaced in the Cold War, but they are more serious today because access to sensitive technology has grown, and some of the structural characteristics of the first nuclear age that provided a degree of control are gone. As Raymond Aron once observed, the United States and the Soviet Union, "les grandes freres," generally took decisive if sometimes heavy-handed steps to keep troublesome allies in line.[1] The second nuclear age generally lacks such structures, which means that order can best come through multilateral cooperative measures advanced by patient, effective diplomacy.

There are two cautionary comments to be made on future diplomatic engagement. First, as Krepon argues persuasively, diplomatic engagement is strengthened when the actions of the United States conform to rules. During the Bush administration, rules were promoted selectively. For example, with righteous (and largely justified) fervor, the United States proclaimed a "crisis of compliance" with the NPT, focused principally on Iran's questionable commitment to nonproliferation. At the same time, the other two pillars of the NPT-peaceful uses and disarmament-were downgraded by the Bush administration as areas of treaty obligation. It will be necessary for the United States to re-establish its commitment to all the rules of the nonproliferation regime, and the U.S. plenary statement at the recent NPT preparatory committee indicates that the U.S. government has returned to a more balanced view of treaty obligations.[2] The three pillars are back. As best it can, the United States will have to navigate around the damaging impact on the nonproliferation regime of the U.S.-Indian agreement.

Second, marshaling bureaucratic and diplomatic resources in the State Department will be a stiff challenge as a result of the ruinous 2005 reorganization of the nonproliferation and arms control bureaus. A cadre of experts, including, most importantly, physical scientists, must be built to compensate for the hemorrhaging of experienced personnel that followed reorganization.

In terms of stated intentions, the Obama presidency has redirected U.S. policy toward Krepon's prescriptions. The president has offered vision and commitment, both of which are welcome and necessary. The opening of strategic arms negotiations with the Russians and the positive NPT preparatory committee in May together represent a good start, but it is still early to assess whether good intentions will become workable undertakings.

In brief, the arms control and nonproliferation tasks ahead are extremely difficult, and success is far from certain. Krepon rightly calls for the United States to reclaim leadership, for without it the probability of a proliferating world will surely increase. While making certain to remain on the path to a nuclear weapons-free world, the United States must also work toward realistic goals. One way to sustain progress is to heed Krepon's advice to avoid timelines. Whether negotiating reductions of strategic nuclear weapons or strengthening a complex nonproliferation regime, it is essential to recognize that commitment, tenacity, and patience are all virtues. Krepon also relates Nitze's wise advice: "Try to reduce the dangers of nuclear war within the relevant future time period as best you can; you just get depressed if you worry about the long-term future." Let us not get depressed. Let us get busy making real, concrete progress.

Barclay Ward is the Alfred Negley Professor of Political Science, Emeritus, at the University of the South.

ENDNOTES


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