A Perpetual Menace: Nuclear Weapons and International Order

By William Walker


William Walker is a rare find: a humanist and elegant writer conversant with technical detail, as well as a specialist in nuclear proliferation who is intrigued by the subject of how power has been applied to create, maintain, and shape nuclear order. Walker is well positioned to provide a big-picture assessment of the nuclear dilemma, in part because he has observed it at a distance from Washington and Moscow.

The dilemmas Walker covers in his latest book will be familiar to most readers. The value of the book, A Perpetual Menace: Nuclear Weapons and International Order, lies in its subtitle: Walker surveys this poorly covered niche with breadth and without academic jargon in a work intended for an audience of general readers as well as practitioners and academic peers. He succeeds best when recasting key events in nuclear history through the lens of an evolving, ragged, but surprisingly successful nuclear order.

Walker shies away from offering more than a sketchy treatment of how the global nuclear order is most likely to evolve from a structural perspective. Instead, he presents a shorthand analysis that rests heavily on familiar policy options and alternative futures.

The book’s title comes from a famous quote by Niels Bohr, who sought to warn President Franklin Roosevelt in a July 1944 memorandum against the horrors of a world with atomic bombs. Bohr understood that a U.S. president would likely find compelling reasons to use a “winning weapon” to end World War II. Nonetheless, he advised that “any temporary advantage, however great, may be outweighed by a perpetual menace to human security.”

Walker seems drawn to Bohr with good reason. They share a sensibility about the bomb, as well as an informed distance from grinding policy decisions governing its evolution.

As Justice Potter Stewart noted with respect to pornography, the nuclear order is more easily recognized than defined. Order in international politics, as Walker notes, is traditionally shaped by the occasion and conclusion of great wars. Nuclear order, in contrast, has been shaped and has evolved in the absence of major wars between major powers.

The nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union could have made the process of creating nuclear order well-nigh impossible. Instead, the race was accompanied by creative diplomacy that ultimately reduced vertical proliferation and limited horizontal proliferation. Three crucial norms backstopping nuclear order evolved during this extended competition: the absence of the bomb’s battlefield use since 1945; an unprecedented, ongoing 15-year moratorium of nuclear testing by major powers; and deep cuts in global inventories. The evolving nuclear order in the vertical and horizontal domains, along with connective tissue between them, may be the most consequential but underappreciated accomplishment of post-World War II diplomacy.
Walker’s introductory chapter is particularly good. The pursuit of nuclear order, he writes, “is inherently problematic, will always be contentious and entail political struggle, has to operate simultaneously at several levels (global, regional, and local, inter-state and intra-state) and can probably never end.” The “central question” that Walker addresses is how states are drawn into “a logic of restraint…. Installing and embedding this logic and rendering it tolerable have lain at the heart of the problem and project of nuclear order.”

Creating order is inherently difficult and impermanent yet necessary, given the diverse equities of states possessing and abstaining from nuclear weapons, ongoing hedging strategies, the flux of civil nuclear power programs, and the unacceptability of any order that permanently recognizes “institutionalized injustice.” Order must also require, at least provisionally, the underpinning of nuclear deterrence, a potentially wild beast domesticated through treaty instruments and norms.

Here, then, is Walker’s definition of international nuclear order: “Given the existence of nuclear technology, the international nuclear order entails evolving patterns of thought and activity that serve primary goals of world survival, war avoidance and economic development; and the quest for a tolerable accommodation of pronounced differences in the capabilities, practices, rights and obligations of states.”

The first foundation stone of nuclear order—deterrence—began of necessity and then was built out quickly by design and by interlocking superpower competition. Foundation stones in the form of treaties were meant to offer diplomatic reassurance to complement deterrence. This build-out went far more slowly, however, encountering severe challenges along the way.

The first treaty, a ban on atmospheric nuclear testing, was concluded after harrowing crises over Berlin and Cuba. It became possible to lay the crucial foundation stone of the 1968 nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) after the question of West Germany’s acquisition of nuclear weapons was answered negatively. Key missing foundation stones were added in 1972—an executive agreement loosely structuring the U.S.-Soviet strategic arms competition and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which effectively precluded national defenses against intercontinental and sea-based ballistic missiles.

Thus, switching metaphors, in the surprisingly short time frame of four years, the two biggest gearboxes of the new mechanism to provide nuclear order were assembled, albeit in wobbly fashion. The NPT was initially short of adherents, including two permanent members of the UN Security Council, with many onlookers keeping their nuclear options open. Sand was continually thrown in this gearbox, initially from the Rajasthan desert, where India carried out a nuclear test, to be followed in due course by Pakistan and North Korea. The long litany of challenges to the NPT need not be repeated here. Walker classifies them either as “specific and contingent problems” (e.g., a particular country seeking the bomb) or as “problems that are intrinsic and lasting, sometimes leading governments into long and frustrating searches for means of accommodating them, without much expectation of a final resolution.” This distinction can become blurry; as was the case on the Indian subcontinent and perhaps in Iran, the pursuit of the bomb can create long, difficult, and unsatisfactory efforts at accommodation.

The second major gearbox, designed to cap and reverse vertical proliferation, was similarly beset from the outset. Immediately after signing the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks agreement (SALT I), Washington and Moscow redoubled their strategic modernization efforts, a major contributing factor to the demise of détente and the rise of a new coterie of policymakers in Washington dubious of the entire enterprise of arms control. They finally succeeded in slaying the ABM Treaty three decades after its negotiation, but the process of deep reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals has continued apace.

The cyclical nature of challenges and progress emerges from Walker’s book. He recounts a series of crises in nuclear order that occurred from 1973 through 1986, including the Indian test, a severe oil crisis that generated renewed global interest in nuclear power, the deterioration of U.S.-Soviet relations, and the demise of the SALT process.
Even so, the primary gearboxes of the nascent nuclear order did not break down. With great effort by Washington, commercial rules of nuclear commerce were tightened; and to the surprise of most observers, President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev managed to shift the nuclear arms race into reverse gear. Despite severe challenges, the two major gearboxes gained additional parts, smaller gears, and lubricants in the 1970s and 1980s. When even more nightmarish challenges to the nuclear order occurred with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, extraordinary diplomatic management by the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton created a stronger nuclear order out of this chaos. Likewise, the surprise discovery of an advanced nuclear weapons program in Iraq facilitated the endorsement of far stronger inspection procedures by the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors. The 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference was uniquely crucial for nuclear order, as states-parties chose to make the treaty permanent.[2]

Walker addresses the ailments now besetting nuclear order, a familiar and depressing witch’s brew of “irregular warfare, commerce and politics.” The moving parts of the enterprise of nuclear order are once again in need of repair and strengthening. One of the additional gears promised at the 1995 review conference, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, is stuck. Construction has yet to begin on another, a fissile material cutoff treaty.

The “sustenance of international order,” as Walker notes, is “an exercise in collective problem solving and institution building over time. It is also an exercise in conciliation—in resolving dissonances—entailing searches for convergence, compromise and quid pro quos, where there are clashes of norms, values and interests.... The thread that nevertheless holds states to a common purpose and to a common idea of order is their awareness of a common vulnerability to the destructive force of nuclear weapons.”

The tightrope walk down the path of nuclear order, Walker writes, must effectively synthesize the conservative and transformational impulses of world politics.... It often seems as if the weapons have created a condition in world politics “without end, reprieve, or rest,” a condition that states and peoples are condemned to manage eternally for their survival, yet a condition that they cannot accept and from which they will always be driven to seek transcendence. There may be no ultimate solutions to the problem of order arising from the nuclear weapon’s invention and release into world politics. The search for solutions is nevertheless inescapable and engrained.

Among the foremost challenges to the sustenance and strengthening of the nuclear order is Washington itself. The United States always has been the primary repairman of these gearboxes, but as Walker notes, Washington’s policy consensus is nearly fractured, with future Republican administrations likely to be dismissive, as the administration of George W. Bush was, of treaties and norm building when it suits their pursuit of unilateral remedies.

The problem of dysfunctional national security politics in the United States rises to the structural level. Other structural challenges include China’s future choices whether to become more of a stakeholder in the nuclear order or more reliant on nuclear weapons for its power projection and India’s prospective role as the perpetual outsider or as a co-manager of nuclear order. Additional structural challenges include the odd, ahistorical circumstance in which nuclear weapons have less and less utility for major powers and greater utility for weak states. Pivotal non-nuclear-weapon states also will define the evolution of the nuclear order. Put another way, as go Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey, so goes the NPT.

Another factor in the nuclear future—one on which Walker places considerable weight, echoing Bohr—is how forcefully and steadfastly nuclear abolition is pursued.

Where is the justice for anyone if the maintenance of nuclear forces for the purpose of security results, through accident or intent, in annihilation?

States and peoples therefore find themselves on the horns of various dilemmas. But the pursuit of nuclear disarmament is a necessary endeavor, however unattainable it may be perceived to be. Kant’s contention (as interpreted by Roger Scruton) is apt: “Ideals must be construed as regulative
principles, which guide us down the path of amelioration.” Just because nuclear disarmament is considered an ideal does not rob it of practical value.

In the book’s conclusion, Walker expresses concerns that the existing nuclear order might not survive contemporary challenges. (His last chapter is titled “Heading for the rocks?”) Current events typically lead analysts to predict dire consequences, and yet the nuclear order and its dominant, positive trend lines have so far survived intact. For example, if the nuclear order could survive the collapse of the Soviet Union, it might also be able to survive an instance of catastrophic nuclear terrorism or an Iran armed with nuclear weapons. As one U.S. official who has encountered her share of negotiating impasses likes to say, “The NPT has become too big to fail.” The same might be said about the management and reduction of Washington’s and Moscow’s nuclear arsenals. These enterprises can and do wobble off the rails, but so far, there have been a sufficient number of protectors to put them back on track.

None of this, however, can be taken for granted. The nuclear order that has promoted international security and norm building was the product of ceaseless labors, a limited number of poor choices, a larger number of wise ones, and the occasional heroic result, especially the NPT, the SALT agreements, and the avoidance of nuclear anarchy after the Soviet Union’s demise.

The world’s sorrows do not take holidays, including the ever-present potential sorrows of a historic scale relating to the bomb. The current challenges to the nuclear order are both unique, in the form of millennial terrorism, and familiar, in the form of outlier states, whose singular accretion may or may not add up to a systemic challenge in the form of cascade effects.

The nuclear order has been slow to take shape, but now has a mature profile. Order can be discerned out of a plethora of possibilities, order shaped by norms and the constraints of prior choices. To maintain nuclear order, Walker points to the remedy of a renewed commitment to nuclear abolition to keep the two main gears of the nuclear order and their subsidiary mechanisms enmeshed. The pursuit of abolition strengthens the NPT regime while unnerving those who find comfort in the existing structure of vertical proliferation.

Walker has opened the doors to many interesting rooms worth exploring. What is the most probable characterization of the nuclear future? Is the current nuclear order susceptible to radical alteration? If so, another dramatic period of construction or deconstruction lies ahead. Are modest additions and subtractions more likely to shape the existing nuclear order at the margins? If so, will these marginal changes yield a more settled or unsettled order? Walker refrains from delving deeply into the most likely answers to these questions, while inviting readers to do so.

Michael Krepon is co-founder of the Stimson Center. His most recent books are Better Safe Than Sorry: The Ironies of Living With the Bomb (2009) and Rummaging in Shoeboxes for Stories About the Bomb, the Nuclear Age and Arms Control (2011).

ENDNOTES


2. The NPT, which entered into force in 1970, mandated a choice at its 25th anniversary on whether it “shall continue in force indefinitely, or shall be extended for an additional fixed period or periods.”