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Loo, Bernard Fook Weng

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The Terrible Allure of Nuclear Weapons

Bernard F.W. Loo

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If Myanmar intends to acquire nuclear weapons, as reports suggest, this reflects a widely-held and terrible attraction that nuclear weapons maintain over military planners. This fascination stems from a misunderstanding about what nuclear weapons can do for a country's national security.

THE RECENT allegations that Myanmar has started to develop a nuclear weapons programme appears to have surprised no one; in a similar vein, no one was surprised when the first news of a nuclear weapons programme in North Korea emerged. If a country is led by a paranoid government eternally suspicious of just about every other state in the international system, then nuclear weapons must surely be the ultimate guarantor of that country's national security.

The Terrible Allure of Nuclear Weapons

Two arguments have traditionally been made in favour of nuclear weapons. One, the eminent nuclear strategist Bernard Brodie had in 1946 called them the Ultimate Weapon. There is something viscerally certain, even iconic, about the nuclear mushroom cloud. More recently, the 21st Century re-imagining of the classic 1970s television series *Battlestar Galactica* revolved around a simple premise: two civilisations, both capable of faster-than-light travel (which Einsteinian physics maintains is impossible) seeking to destroy the other with nuclear weapons. This premise reflects the emotive power that nuclear weapons exercises over the human imagination.

Two, nuclear weapons offer an apparent cost-effective alternative to the otherwise expensive business of acquiring and maintaining armed forces. Defence budgets typically go a lot to manpower costs. A nuclear weapons programme offers the prospect of significant downsizing of the armed forces and consequently significant cuts in defence spending; it can also have civilian energy spinoffs. For states with nuclear ambitions – the so-called nuclear wannabes – these arguments appear to be very persuasive.

Deterring Aggression with Nuclear Weapons – Two Arguments

There are two key arguments that relate nuclear weapons to national security. The first posits a

scenario is where a nuclear state faces potential aggression from a non-nuclear state. In this scenario, it is possible to argue that the mere possession of a nuclear weapon should be sufficient to act as a deterrent against external aggression. It would be tempting to ascribe this state of affairs to the case of Israel, long suspected of having an opaque nuclear weapons programme, in its relations with its Arab neighbours.

This scenario is, however, problematic. Any nuclear retaliation against a conventional military offensive crosses a threshold that has remained intact since 1945. This renders the nuclear state as a pariah, likely to then face a variety of very severe sanctions imposed by the international community.

The second argument involves threats to the nuclear wannabe's existence from an existing nuclear state. The argument is that for the nuclear wannabe, the possession of nuclear weapons will deter any aggression from other nuclear states, and therefore provide the country with a measure of national security. After all, as one Indian general was alleged to have remarked, the signal lesson of Operation Iraqi Freedom is that if one wishes to go up against the United States, it had better make sure it already had a nuclear weapon.

Nuclear Weapons and National Security – a Critique

This is where most of the misconceptions about nuclear deterrence and national security begin to enter into strategic analysis. What deters aggression between two nuclear powers, what keeps the nuclear peace in other words, is not the fact that both are nuclear powers. If that were the case, all nuclear powers should only need to maintain only one nuclear weapon in each arsenal. The fact that this is not the case suggests that nuclear deterrence and nuclear peace may be rather more complicated.

If a nuclear wannabe genuinely believes that nuclear weapons will enhance its security, it needs to keep in mind two considerations. One is retaliation. What maintains the peace between two adversarial nuclear states is the fear that one may attack first, but the victim will still have nuclear weapons that survive this first attack. The nuclear weapons that have survived will then be sufficient for the victim to launch a retaliatory attack against the aggressor, and inflict on the aggressor levels of damage that are politically unacceptable.

This means the nuclear wannabe will need either a very extensive nuclear arsenal, or it will need to ensure that its nuclear arsenal is survivable, either by hardening nuclear silos or by deploying their nuclear weapons on mobile, difficult-to-detect platforms such as missile submarines. Neither option is actually cheap; both subvert the myth of nuclear weapons as a low-cost solution to national security challenges.

The second critical element in nuclear deterrence is that of sufficient warning. This typically – but not exclusively – applies in the case of states with very small nuclear arsenals that are not likely to survive a nuclear first strike. In this instance, one state has the capacity to react quickly enough in the event of a nuclear attack, to launch its own nuclear weapons against the aggressor before its arsenal is destroyed. In this instance, because both adversaries know each other has sufficient early warning of impending nuclear attack, any nuclear aggression by one will almost certainly be counter-productive, inasmuch as it will lead to the state's own nuclear demise.

The nuclear wannabe will have to undertake serious investments in geostationary satellites that can monitor the nuclear weapons facilities of its putative adversaries, advanced command and control facilities that allow for quick launch of its nuclear weapons. Again, this is not a cheap option, and demands of such states very high levels of technological expertise that most states will lack.

Nuclear Deterrence from Theory to Practice

It therefore means that if any state, genuinely worried about its survival and security, seeks to acquire nuclear weapons, the mere possession of even a handful of nuclear weapons – assuming the country then has the systems that can deliver these nuclear weapons against its putative adversary – is not enough. Secondly, nuclear weapons will not constitute a cheap, cost-effective security for the country. The great irony is that if any state genuinely desires to acquire nuclear weapons, it has made itself more vulnerable to external attacks than ever before.

Bernard F.W. Loo, educated at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth, is Associate Professor of war and military strategy at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.