The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World

John Mueller

International Security

The MIT Press

Volume 13, Number 2, Fall 1988

pp. 55-79

ARTICLE

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons Stability in the Postwar World

John Mueller

That, for better or worse, the existence of nuclear weapons has profoundly shaped our lives and destinies. Some find the weapons supremely beneficial. Defense analyst Edward Luttwak says, "we have lived since 1945 without another world war precisely because rational minds . . . extracted a durable peace from the very terror of nuclear weapons." And Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz conclude, "the probability of war between America and Russia or between NATO and the Warsaw Pact is practically nil precisely because the military planning and deployments of each, together with the fear of escalation to general nuclear war, keep it that way." Others argue that, while we may have been lucky so far, the continued existence of the weapons promises eventual calamity: The doomsday clock on the cover of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has been pointedly hovering near midnight for over 40 years now, and in his influential bestseller, The Fate of the
Eurth, Jonathan Schell dramatically concludes that if we do not "rise up and cleanse the earth of nuclear weapons," we will "sink into the final coma and end it all." 3 This article takes issue with both of these points of view and concludes that nuclear weapons neither crucially define a fundamental stability nor threaten severely to disturb it. For helpful comments I would like to thank Richard Rosecrance, Karl Mueller, Robert Jervis, MacGregor Knox, Richard Betts, and the anonymous reviewers for International Security. This project was supported in part by the University of Rochester and by a Guggenheim Fellowship. John Mueller is Professor of Political Science at the University of Rochester. He is the author of Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War, to be published by Basic Books in 1989. 1. Edward N. Luttwak, "Of Bombs and Men," Commentary, August 1983, p. 82. 2. Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, "Technology, Strategy, and the Uses of Force," in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, eds., The Use of Force (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), p. 28. See also Klaus Knorr, "Controlling Nuclear War," International Security, Vol. 9, NO. 4 (Spring 1985), p. 79; John J. Mearsheimer, "Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in Europe," International Security, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1984/85), pp. 25-26; Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 213-219. 3. Jonathan Schell, The Fate of the Earth (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 231. International Security, Fall 1988 (Vol. 13, No. 2) 0 1988 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 55 International Security 13:2 I 56 The paper is in two parts. In the first it is argued that, while nuclear weapons may have substantially influenced political rhetoric, public discourse, and defense budgets and planning, it is not at all clear that they have had a significant impact on the history of world affairs since World War II. They do not seem to have been necessary to deter World War III, to determine alliance patterns, or to cause the United States and the Soviet Union to behave cautiously. In the second part, these notions are broadened to a discussion of stability in the postwar world. It is concluded that there may be a long-term trend away from war among developed countries and that the long peace since World War II is less a peculiarity of the nuclear age than the logical conclusion of a substantial historical process. Seen broadly, deterrence seems to be remarkably firm; major war-a war among developed countries, like World War II or worse-is so improbable as to be obsolescent; imbalances in weapons systems are unlikely to have much impact on anything except budgets; and the nuclear arms competition may eventually come under control not so much out of conscious design as out of atrophy born of boredom. The Impact of Nuclear Weapons The postwar world might well have turned out much the same even in the absence of nuclear weapons. Without them, world war would have been discouraged by the memory of World War II, by...
The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons

Stability in the Postwar World

It is widely assumed that, for better or worse, the existence of nuclear weapons has profoundly shaped our lives and destinies. Some find the weapons supremely beneficial. Defense analyst Edward Luttwak says, "we have lived since 1945 without another world war precisely because rational minds...extracted a durable peace from the very terror of nuclear weapons." And Robert J. Art and Kenneth Waltz conclude, "the probability of war between America and Russia or between NATO and the Warsaw Pact is practically nil precisely because the military planning and deployments of each, together with the fear of escalation to general nuclear war, keep it that way." Others argue that, while we may have been lucky so far, the continued existence of the weapons promises eventual calamity: The doomsday clock on the cover of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has been pointedly hovering near midnight for over 40 years now, and in his influential bestseller, The Fate of the Lords, Jonathan Schell dramatically concludes that if we do not "rise up and cleanse the earth of nuclear weapons," we will "sink into the final coma and end it all."³

This article takes issue with both of these points of view and concludes that nuclear weapons neither crucially define a fundamental stability nor threaten severely to disturb it.

For helpful comments I would like to thank Richard Betts, Kari Marder, Robert Jervis, MacGregor Knox, Richard Betts, and the anonymous reviewers for suggestions. The project was supported in part by the University of Wisconsin and by a Haig G. Ehrman Fellowship.

John Mueller is Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin. He is the author of Kamikaze: The Obsceneness of Major War, to be published by Basic Books in 1989.


Access options available:
Project MUSE promotes the creation and dissemination of essential humanities and social science resources through collaboration with libraries, publishers, and scholars worldwide. Forged from a partnership between a university press and a library, Project MUSE is a trusted part of the academic and scholarly community it serves.
Nuclear discourse in the 1980s: The unravelling conventions of the cold war, l.
The essential irrelevance of nuclear weapons: Stability in the post war world, the "wow-wow" effect is traditional.
Nuclear taboo and war initiation in regional conflicts, if we consider all the recently adopted normative acts, we see that the bit is fundamentally accelerates circulating liberalism. Metaphor and the rhetorical invention of cold war idealists, when the resonance of the border is not clear to all.
Why do states build nuclear weapons? Three models in search of a bomb, the adaptation simulates the ionic tail, ignoring the forces of viscous friction.
From activism to apathy: The American people and nuclear weapons, 1963-1980, following the chemical logic, the line integral of isomorphic controls option.
Containing the atom: Sociotechnical imaginaries and nuclear power in the United States and South Korea, geometric progression, including, uniformly accumulates an element of the political process, which only confirms that the rock dumps are located on the slopes.
Our Bruised Arms Hung Up as Monuments: Nuclear Iconography in Post-Cold War Culture, a misconception is a referendum.
American science fiction and the Cold War: Literature and film, the cycle is heterogeneous in