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Preserving Nuclear Peace

by

Paul D. Wolfowitz

More than forty years ago, on 17 June 1942, President Roosevelt received a report from Vannevar Bush describing the possibilities of producing a nuclear weapon that could be employed decisively in combat. Under any of four possible methods, Bush told the President, such a weapon might be produced in time to influence the outcome of the ongoing war. The next day, President Roosevelt approved Bush's report and the Army Engineer Corps was directed to create a new unit that has become familiar in history as the Manhattan Project.

Neither Roosevelt nor Bush could have foreseen just how the project they undertook that day would alter the way the world would think of war—and the way it would think of peace. It was the source of a concern that has become most urgent today, a concern that will affect the rest of human history: What are the prospects of preserving the nuclear peace?

That question is as important as any other we can ask about the future. And it is a much broader question than might be immediately apparent.

The prospects for preventing nuclear war depend on far more than just what we do about nuclear weapons themselves. They depend also on what we do to reduce the many local sources of conflict in the world and on what we do to promote possibilities of peaceful change. And they depend on what we do to restrain the Soviet use of force to exploit these sources of conflict.

The Problems of a Nuclear Freeze

It has become almost commonplace to contemplate the horror of the nuclear threat. And the reaction has been, appropriately enough, a strong expression of revulsion and dread.

But along with that reaction there is often a corollary suspicion, a suspicion that those who attempt to analyze nuclear policies—who deal in such abstractions as “balance,” “vulnerability,” and “survivability”—must somehow be blind to the awful reality of nuclear war. The idea seems to be that the solution is clear and simple. It does not require painstaking analysis of the complexities of nuclear deterrence, or the hard lessons of the old problem of war and peace.

The deep yearning for simple solutions is understandable, but it is dangerous. Concern about nuclear war is not what divides us; and concern alone is not a license to ignore the complexities of nuclear deterrence or the realities of international relations.

For example, the call for negotiating a freeze on the production, testing, and deployment of nuclear weapons (and their delivery systems) is an appealingly simple idea but, unfortunately, one which fails dangerously to answer the complexities of our situation. What divides those opposed to a nuclear freeze from its advocates is not disagreement about the danger of nuclear war, but disagreement about how best to avert that danger. The questions to ask about a nuclear freeze are: Will it make us safer? Or will it increase the danger?

Those favoring a freeze often assume that the situation is growing more dangerous with each passing day. Therefore, the reasoning goes, a freeze will at least keep things from getting worse.

The hostility to new military technology is understandable. After all, it is technology that brought us nuclear weapons. But not all technological developments have increased our peril. Technological changes have actually made nuclear weapons less likely to have accidents, less vulnerable to terrorists, and less susceptible to unauthorized use than before. By making nuclear delivery systems less vulnerable than before, new technology can reduce the danger of hairtrigger responses or surprise attack, as nuclear propulsion for submarines has done in the past; and as advanced aircraft technology may do in the future.

Is the purpose of the freeze to stop nuclear forces from becoming ever more destructive? In fact, changes in our nuclear forces have made it possible to reduce the total megatonnage of our "strategic" nuclear forces by almost 30 percent in the last ten years and by roughly 60 percent from the peak levels of 1960.

Is the purpose of negotiating a freeze to stop those changes that could make our deterrent forces more vulnerable? Our land-based missiles are already vulnerable, and a nuclear freeze would do nothing to stop improvements in Soviet conventional air defense or ASW capabilities that could threaten our bombers and submarines. But a freeze would prevent us from replacing those forces that are already vulnerable, or those that might become vulnerable in the future, with different, more secure ones.

In sum, the hard and complex question is whether a freeze would increase or decrease the chances of war. Just as there can be stabilizing as well as destabilizing weapons, so there can be both stabilizing and destabilizing arms control proposals.

What Could Cause a Nuclear War?

The desire for a simple solution to the danger of nuclear war, however, produces not only an overly simple version of arms control, but perhaps the

greatest oversimplification of all—the preoccupation with nuclear weapons themselves.

Nuclear weapons have transformed human history by transforming the nature and consequences of war. But they have changed the basic causes of war very little, if at all.

Nuclear weapons have raised the possibility that a war might start because of an accidental use of weapons, something that has no parallel in history. And nuclear weapons have made the age-old problem of surprise attack far more dangerous than in previous periods of history. Making these weapons ever safer and less vulnerable is therefore of the greatest importance.

But if we concentrate too much on the weapons themselves, we may neglect an even greater danger: That a conventional war between the Soviet Union and the United States, perhaps one very local in its origins, might grow into a nuclear catastrophe.

Even complete, verifiable nuclear disarmament could not remove the knowledge that nuclear weapons can be built. Global conventional war, therefore, will always raise the nuclear danger. The genie is out of the bottle. It may, we hope, be tamed and controlled, but it can never be put back in.

What we do to prevent war of any kind between the superpowers is therefore as important as what we do about nuclear weapons themselves. In fact, decisions about nuclear weapons, both in our own military planning and in arms control negotiations, should be judged as much by how they affect the likelihood of such a conventional war as by any other standard.

There is, unfortunately, plenty of historical evidence about how conventional wars begin and how they escalate:

The train of events that led from a terrorist incident at Sarajevo to the conflagration we call World War I, shows that small wars can become much bigger ones when outside powers have a stake in the outcome.

Misunderstandings also lead to war, whether by communicating exaggerated threats or by conveying inadequate warnings (as in the British failure to make clear their determination to fight in 1914, in 1939, or, for that matter, in 1982).

The examples of Korea and Afghanistan, to name just two cases, are reminders that military weakness can create opportunities for expansionist powers to commit aggression.

And the disastrous history of the 1930s, strewn with broken commitments from Ethiopia to the Rhineland to Munich, provides tragic evidence that failure to maintain commitments can both mislead adversaries into confrontation and force potential allies to make dangerous accommodations.

The evidence from the past about how wars are started or prevented is not rendered obsolete by the nuclear threat. Indeed it is made more urgent.

The Importance of Managing East-West Relations

The last ten years have seen increasing Soviet use of force, both directly and by proxy. Constructing effective restraints on that use of force is the central task we face as we work to preserve peace.

The key to preventing nuclear war is the successful management of East-West relations.

Over the past forty years Americans have sought to structure East-West relations around a number of different abstract models, starting with our initial disappointed expectations about Soviet participation in an international order based on the United Nations.

At the end of World War II, many thought that a stable division of the world into *spheres of influence* might be possible, in which conflict would be avoided because interests would not overlap. But dividing the world into spheres of influence cannot end the competition because the dividing line itself would become the crucial point of contention.

In particular the countries of Europe and Asia are not mere pieces of territory but are themselves crucial factors in the global balance. We recognize this when we say that one of our greatest strengths is the strength of our allies. For reasons that are Russian as well as Communist, defensive as well as offensive, the Soviets regard the independence of these countries as a threat and domination over them as essential to security.

This quest for absolute security leads the Soviets to exploit Western talk of spheres of influence only when it gives them something they do not have already. It is as if they say "what's in my sphere is mine—what's in yours, is up for grabs."

More fundamentally, the notion of spheres of influence fails to recognize that the competition is not only about territory or material interests, but about political principles as well. Soviet principles are meant to be universal, and despite the dreary record of Communist performance, they still attract those who seek the violent transformation of society. Western principles too are universal. For instance, Poland shows the universal attractiveness of democratic ideals.

Indeed, the greatest failing of the spheres of influence approach is that it assumes the right and ability of superpowers to control the fate of others. The stability it seems to offer is illusory not only because the superpowers cannot agree on how to divide the world, but because the peoples of the world cannot be bound by any such agreement. Curiously, no one in the West would claim for his country the right to deprive others of their independence, but we are often too willing to concede that right to the Soviet Union. No one in the West would give up his country's right to self-government, but we are often too willing to concede that right for the people of Eastern Europe or the Third World.

It has usually taken Soviet actions—in Korea, in Hungary, or in Afghanistan—to remind us that such a division does not produce a natural

self-enforcing equilibrium among nations. But our own principles should remind us as well, for the notion of spheres of influence violates the very principle of self-government for which the West stands. And the examples of Yugoslavia, Rumania, and Austria demonstrate, each in different ways, that pressure on the Soviets to accommodate to that principle, even within areas they dominate, can contribute to global stability.

The second major concept that influenced American policy toward the Soviet Union was *containment*. It did not make the mistake of thinking that an agreed self-enforcing division of the world could be stable. On the contrary, it claimed that the Soviet Union would move to fill every vacuum and required us to meet every such move with "unalterable counterforce." North Korea's invasion of the South lent a note of prophecy to these predictions and prescriptions which gave the doctrine of containment added force.

Nor did containment ignore the potential international consequences of domestic changes. In fact, it counted on Soviet economic and ideological weakness and the looming post-Stalin succession struggle to change the Soviet Union overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies.

Perhaps being too sanguine about internal developments within the Soviet Union led to a short-term perspective that underestimated the importance of internal developments within other countries that might create opportunities for Soviet expansion. Still less did it reckon that the Soviets might acquire radical allies far from their borders whose ideological enthusiasm and zeal for spreading violent revolution might far exceed their own.

Perhaps because containment underestimated the staying power of the Soviet Union, it tended to take our own for granted. Assuming a favorable balance and practically unlimited resources made it possible to contemplate meeting every Soviet attempt at expansion with unalterable counterforce. But such an assumption is not suitable to a long-term competition in which costs must be proportionate to the stakes at risk and in which we must exploit areas of our strength or of Soviet weakness.

The third major concept that governed US policy toward the Soviet Union was that of *détente*. It is perhaps not surprising that the exhaustion produced by the Vietnam experience led to exaggerated hopes that the nature of the US-Soviet relationship could be transformed from one of competition to one of cooperation. Unlike containment, *détente* did not look to a transformation of the Soviet system in order to achieve this change. *Détente* considered internal change in Soviet society a secondary concern, though it held out the hope that such changes could best go forward in an environment of decreasing international tensions.

Instead, *détente* concentrated on the prospect that Soviet internal problems and desire for Western trade and technology to cope with them

could be the basis for a network of relationships and vested interests that would give the Soviets a stake in restraint and cooperation. Soviet foreign policy would be transformed because the economic problems of the USSR and Eastern Europe would lead them to acknowledge an economic interdependence that would add an element of stability to the political equation. It was thought that positive economic incentives for restraint could powerfully complement resistance to expansion. It was even hoped that the advent of military parity would temper Soviet militancy rather than tempt Moscow to use its increasing military capability to expand.

Détente failed for several basic reasons. We could not reshape the Soviet leaders' fundamental views of their interests simply through negotiations. Nor could we reach agreement with them on an operative code of conduct, given the deep differences between democratic and Soviet views of international morality, popular consent, and governmental legitimacy. As Henry Trofimenko, a prominent Soviet analyst of foreign affairs, recently wrote, the "elaboration of certain more specific rules of conduct stands little practical chance of success in view of the objective factors leading to revolutionary changes in the Third World, and in light of the conflicting evaluations given to these phenomena by the capitalist and socialist countries."

Nor could we produce restraint in Soviet conduct by creating networks of relationships or webs of interdependency. The positive incentives we have to offer are not of sufficient weight to substitute for negative constraints on Soviet expansion. It is hardly surprising that this should be so with a regime as autarchic and as revolutionary in its international aims as the Soviet Union, when we recall that the much more extensive trading relationships among the European nations failed to prevent two devastating wars. Nor do the Soviets have such a need for external legitimation that the mere fact of negotiations themselves can exert effective leverage on Soviet conduct.

Moreover, the positive aspects of East-West relations are not simply levers that we can control. Trade creates dependencies on our side as well as theirs, and is something the West can regulate less easily than can the totalitarian East. Negotiations serve our interests as well as theirs.

Most importantly, however, détente failed because it undercut the negative constraints on Soviet expansion by encouraging the very hope that helped give rise to détente, the hope that the United States could retreat from the rigors and responsibilities of leadership.

The Reality of East-West Relations

Beneath the shifting theories and slogans, the reality of East-West relations has not changed much. As one commentator, Andre Fontaine, put it, détente often seemed to be merely the pursuit of cold war by other means—and even the means were often the same.

Even at the height of the cold war, constructive and enduring agreements were made. Austria today is an independent and united country, free of Soviet occupying forces, because of the 1955 Treaty. Successful arms control agreements, such as the Limited Test Ban Treaty, were achieved without the benefit of an "era of negotiations." Even at the height of détente, crises were resolved not by codes of conduct, webs of interdependence, or Soviet desires for trade and cultural exchanges, but rather by communications and negotiations, the basic tools of diplomacy, backed up by the common desire to avoid war and by effective credible deterrence. That basic incentive for cooperation has been with us since the advent of nuclear weapons.

For all of their differences, each of those three models of US-Soviet relations reflected a hope that the competition could be definitively ended, that we could stop shouldering the terrible burdens of world leadership, that we could stop depending on the terrible threat of nuclear weapons. But the reality is that neither the US-Soviet competition nor nuclear weapons can be wished away.

The wish for a less competitive relationship with the Soviet Union is more than understandable. But wishing will not make it so. To the contrary, unrealistic hopes can make the competition more dangerous. To think that Soviet aims may change in the near future leads us to neglect those actions necessary to maintain favorable balances and compete effectively over the long haul. To think that we can harmonize Soviet objectives with our own, whether by agreements and negotiations or by a sudden weakening of Soviet power and resolve, leads us to neglect both the fundamental differences that underlie the competition and the balances that underlie agreements.

The reality is that the competition is fundamental; it is long-term and dynamic, not short-term and static; and it is governed by the facts of the balance of power rather than regulated by agreed norms. There is first of all the central fact of our time—nuclear weapons. A stable *nuclear balance* gives both sides a vital interest in avoiding direct confrontation and seeking safer modes of competition. Other important facts that shape how the competition is waged include global and regional balances of conventional military forces.

But the balance of power, or what the Soviets call "the correlation of forces," is not just military. It includes the strengths and strains in each side's alliances, the openings and barriers to either side's influence in specific countries and regions, each side's economic needs and resources, and the domestic political support or opposition for their policies. It is these facts, often even more than military advantages, that determine which side makes decisive gains. Great changes have occurred without armies crossing borders—from the triumph of communism in Cuba, through the Sino-Soviet split and the expulsion of the Soviets from Egypt, to the fall of the Shah in Iran.

It is these facts of the balance of power that constrain the competition even in the absence of agreements, that are essential for successful negotiations, and that make agreements endure. Both which side gains in the competition and how safely it is conducted are determined by the constantly shifting facts of the balance of power. Agreements can be reached to make the competition safer so long as they are based on the facts, and they will be kept so long as the facts are maintained that make it in the interest of both sides to do so.

A recognition that the US-Soviet competition is fundamentally constrained by facts rather than regulated by agreed norms enables us to adopt a businesslike and productive tone in communications with the Soviets. As the President said a year ago, "We must strive to speak of them not belligerently but firmly and frankly. And that's why we must never fail to note, as frequently as necessary, the true, the wide gulf between our codes of morality."

At the same time as we strive to alert world opinion to the moral character of Soviet conduct, in our dealings with the Soviets we must bear in mind that what we consider episodes of their misconduct occur not from sudden impulses of immorality but from our failure to maintain or establish conditions that effectively constrain their conduct. We will persuade them not through denunciations or appeals to shared norms, but through appeal to our common interest in survival and through establishing secure military balances and regional situations as well as other effective factual constraints.

Recent Trends in the East-West Balance

The fundamental reality of the East-West relationship—as a long-term dynamic competition governed by the facts of the balance of power—has not changed. But specific facts of the balance have shifted over the past ten years in ways both adverse to the West and dangerous to world peace.

To achieve safer and more favorable balances, we must address two crucial adverse trends of the past decade:

First, increased instability in the developing world, particularly in areas on which we have become dependent for energy, strategic raw materials and vital sea routes.

Second, two decades of steadily increasing Soviet military investment that have permitted the Soviets not only to eliminate, and in some cases, reverse US strategic advantages, but also:

- to increase their previous conventional superiority in Europe and Asia;
- and to develop their capability to project power far beyond their borders, especially through exploiting the radical allies they have acquired in Cuba, Libya, Vietnam and elsewhere.

Either one of these two trends, Western dependence on unstable areas and the growth in Soviet military power, would be dangerous by itself. But the interaction of the two has produced the most dangerous phenomenon of the

past decade: the increasing Soviet tendency not merely to accumulate military force, but to use it, directly and by proxy, in unstable regions of the world where the West has vital interests. The Soviets supported the use of force by their allies in Angola, Ethiopia, Kampuchea, Chad, and Central America. Most disturbingly of all, they themselves invaded and occupied Afghanistan when their clients there proved unable to prevail over the opposition of the vast majority of the population.

Meeting the Challenge

If we are serious about preventing nuclear war, nothing is more important than reversing this trend toward the use of force by the Soviet Union and its proxies. That challenge requires a threefold effort.

First, we must work to reduce the underlying causes of instability in the developing world. This requires a multiplicity of wide-ranging efforts, efforts to which we would be committed even were there no East-West competition:

- Diplomatic efforts to achieve peaceful settlements of disputes, as in the Middle East and southern Africa;
- Economic programs such as the Caribbean Basin initiative to encourage free economic development and to reduce the poverty and injustice that help to cause instability;
- Political programs to encourage free political development and build the "infrastructure of democracy."

Second, we must strengthen the restraints against Soviet use of force. For even with the greatest possible success in reducing the source of instability, they will continue to offer the Soviets opportunities over the next decade. Success in promoting peaceful development depends on our ability to provide security against Soviet intervention.

To do so, we must first of all improve and preserve the credibility of our nuclear deterrent. But we must also urgently remedy the conventional deficiencies that we tolerated for too long, and even allowed to get worse, under the shield of a vanishing nuclear superiority. The war over the Falkland Islands last year between Britain and Argentina shows most clearly that even complete nuclear superiority is not a substitute for conventional forces tailored for and clearly committed to crucial missions.

Conventional deterrence also depends critically on strengthening traditional alliances in Europe and Asia and on building new partnerships with developing countries that share our interest in restraining Soviet use of force. To do so requires the global strengthening of our own conventional forces. It also requires the ability to project force in support of threatened allies, for no ally can relish the prospect of enduring an attack while being "defended" somewhere else.

It requires security assistance to countries that are the potential targets of

Soviet or proxy aggression, and it requires strategic cooperation to permit our forces to operate effectively with others. Above all, it requires the restoration of confidence in American consistency and reliability.

We must also strengthen restraints against Soviet indirect use of force. The network of Soviet proxies enables the Soviets to strike at Western interests with much less cost, blame, or risk than if they acted directly. Western policy therefore must raise the costs for these regimes at as many points as possible to counteract the advantages that they possess as a network. In the long run we can work to create conditions that will make it in the interests of these regimes to adopt more independent policies, since we generally have less fundamental divergence of interests and more leverage with them than we do with the Soviets.

The third element in our response, besides reducing sources of instability and strengthening restraints on Soviet use of force, must be to seek agreements that make the competition safer. We can't end the competition, and should not promise to do so. But through agreements (like the one on Incidents at Sea), we can make it safer. Through arms control, we can strengthen some of the inhibitions on the use of force. Through agreements like the Austrian Treaty and the Berlin Agreement, we can reduce some of the specific sources of conflict. Unfortunately, intervention by the Soviet Union and its clients in recent years has added to the agenda of international concerns a large number of new regional issues: Afghanistan, Kampuchea, Angola, Central America, and the Horn of Africa. Efforts to resolve such problems are as important as arms control for preventing nuclear war.

We should treat negotiations neither as a favor to the Soviets nor as a means of fundamentally altering the nature of their regime or their relationship with us, but as an opportunity for making agreements in our interest. We cannot expect arms control negotiations and agreements in themselves to stop the Soviet Union from continuing to pursue and exploit a favorable military balance. But we can and must use them to constrain the military competition in specific ways that make both sides safer and lessen the possibility of the use of force and threats. Similarly, we cannot expect either the denial or the expansion of East-West trade to work a radical change in Soviet objectives or Soviet society. But we can make economic arrangements that are in both sides' interests and we can avoid arrangements that expand their capacity to wage a military competition or that constrain the capacity of the West to compete effectively.

In the next few years, we may have opportunities to make progress on these difficult issues. After almost 20 years of Brezhnev's leadership, a generational change in leadership seems to be underway, and it might lead to greater flexibility in Soviet policy. The Soviets' continued economic problems, for example, may constrain the Soviets' ability to compete and increase the

weight of some of our levers, provided we can succeed in bringing those levers under control.

In considering these opportunities, however, there is also a need for caution. Although it is almost un-American not to be optimistic, we need to recognize that the possibility of change in the Soviet Union presents us with a mixture of dangers as well as opportunities. As in the past, change in the Soviet Union need not be for the better. The new leadership may turn out to be more flexible and moderate, but it could instead prove to be bolder, more sophisticated and more dangerous. Internal problems may cause the Soviets to relent in their military efforts, as people have predicted they will do for decades. Or they could produce attempts to compensate through military advantages. Moreover, as we saw so clearly with Khrushchev, there is no necessary connection between internal reform and moderation in Soviet foreign policy.

Despite its problems, the Soviet Union may today be even harder to reform than in the past. Ten or fifteen years ago, many observers thought that the increasingly bureaucratic evolution of the Soviet Union would make change easier. But this trend seems instead to have made it harder to reform a deeply entrenched and institutionalized system in which important centers of power can oppose initiatives from the top. We should not base our policies on the expectation of near-term change.

The current Soviet leadership under Andropov might prove more flexible in negotiations than Brezhnev was; and we should be prepared to build on such flexibility if it is real, rather than just a projection of our own desires. But whether we view the Soviet leadership at a particular time as reputed hawks with room to maneuver, or as supposed moderates under pressure from hardliners, we must always be willing to make any agreement that would leave us safer and never be willing to accept one that would leave us—and world peace—less secure. We should not believe that we can turn what may be a Soviet “tactical maneuver” into a “lasting transformation” or we will find ourselves unprepared for and inviting a tactical shift back from accommodation to aggression. There is a great deal of difference between expecting to establish a permanently different pattern of conduct and simply creating and maintaining conditions which make the use of force unattractive for the Soviets.

Without fundamentally and permanently changing the objectives and attitudes of the Soviet regime, we can nevertheless produce an improvement in their conduct by policies that make such an improvement in their interest. That improvement will last only so long as our policies continue to maintain conditions conducive to it in an inevitably changing world. Policies of Western weakness that establish an environment or balance more favorable to Soviet aggression are likely to undo such improvement.

We owe it to ourselves, however, as well as to our principles, to work for change within the Soviet empire, for the competition will end only when

there is a transformation of the Soviet regime that secures the rights of its citizens.

Not only our own dedication to freedom but also solemn international obligations, undertaken by the Soviets themselves, oblige us to do all we can for the cause of human rights within the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Ultimately the cause of peace demands as much. As Andrei Sakharov has said, human rights are "part and parcel of international security—the most important conditions for international trust and security are the openness of society, the observation of the civil and political rights of man."

But while we must work for such change, we cannot expect it soon to transform the nature of East-West relations. And we cannot base our policies on the expectation that it will do so.

We can do more to build a just world and a safer world:

- if we are strong, than if we are weak;
- if we are respected, than if we are dismissed;
- if we proceed with reason and courage, than if we hang back until forced to act.

Thus, the path we must follow, is an arduous—and dangerous—one. But then few routes are quicker, and none are safer. Short cuts do not exist.

The choice before us is not between peace and freedom. We do not choose freedom at the expense of peace. By promoting freedom we build what is ultimately the most secure foundation for peace as well. Nor can we choose peace at the expense of freedom. Even surrender would not prevent wars between the totalitarian powers that would inherit the earth. Peace and freedom are inseparable.

And only in such a world can mankind live at peace with its terrible nuclear secret.

Mr. Wolfowitz was the Director, Policy Planning Staff, Department of State, at the time this article was written. He is currently Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.