The Great Debate

Is Nuclear Zero the Best Option?

Yes: Scott D. Sagan

Every time Barack Obama announces that he is in favor of a world free of nuclear weapons, the nuclear hawks descend. Soon after his inauguration, former-Reagan administration Pentagon official Frank Gaffney proclaimed that the president “stands to transform the ‘world’s only superpower’ into a nuclear impotent.” After Obama promised in his 2009 Prague speech that “the United States will take concrete steps toward a world without nuclear weapons,” former–Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger declared that “the notion that we can abolish nuclear weapons reflects on a combination of American utopianism and American parochialism.” And when the president won the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, in part for his embrace of the disarmament vision, Time Magazine even ran an essay entitled “Want Peace? Give a Nuke the Nobel.”

Obama is right to declare, loudly and often, that the United States seeks a world without nuclear weapons, and the administration is right to be taking concrete steps now toward that long-term goal. Indeed, by proclaiming that America seeks nuclear zero, Obama is simply reaffirming that we will follow our treaty commitments: states that joined the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) agreed “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.” And since Article 6 of America’s Constitution says that a treaty commitment is “the supreme Law of the Land,” at a basic level, Obama is simply saying that he will follow U.S. law.

The abolition aspiration is not, however, based on such legal niceties. Instead, it is inspired by two important insights about the global nuclear future. First, the most dangerous nuclear threats to the United States today and on the horizon are from terrorists and potential new nuclear powers, not from our traditional Cold War adversaries in Russia and China. Second, the spread of nuclear weapons to new states, and indirectly to terrorist organizations, will be made less likely if the United States and other nuclear-armed nations are seen to be working in good faith toward disarmament.

Nuclear weapons may have been a dangerous necessity to keep the Cold War cold. But scholars and policy makers who are nostalgic for the brutal simplicity of that era’s nuclear deterrence do not understand how much the world has changed. The choice we face is not between a nuclear-free world or a return to bipolar Cold War deterrence; it is between creating a nuclear-weapons-free world or living in a world with many more nuclear-weapons states. And if there are more nuclear nations, and more atomic weapons in global arsenals, there will be more opportunities for

Scott D. Sagan is the Caroline S. G. Professor of Political Science at Stanford University and co-director of Stanford’s Center for International Security and Cooperation.
terrorists to steal or buy the bomb.

The threat of nuclear-armed terrorists is not new. In 1977, the Red Army Faction in West Germany attacked a U.S. military base hoping to steal the tactical nuclear weapons there. The Aum Shinrikyo apocalyptic cult in Japan sought recruits in the Russian military in the 1990s to get access to loose nukes and only settled on using sarin-gas chemicals in the Tokyo subway when their nuclear efforts failed. Today’s threat is even more alarming. It is well known that Osama bin Laden has proclaimed that Islamic jihadis have a duty to acquire and to use nuclear weapons against the West. And al-Qaeda is known to have recruited senior Pakistani nuclear scientists in the past and may now have “sleeper agents” in Pakistani laboratories to help in that effort.

The easier-to-acquire radioactive dirty bomb with its concomitant threat to kill up to one thousand people and create environmental havoc is already a reality. In 2004, Dhiren Barot, a veteran of jihadi campaigns in Kashmir, was arrested in London. He admitted to plotting attacks against the New York Stock Exchange and the World Bank and possessed detailed plans to acquire nuclear materials from ten thousand smoke detectors for a radiological device. In a report sent to al-Qaeda central, Barot wrote that “estimated casualties [would] be in [the] region of 500 long-term affected if dispersed in [a] busy area (Inshalla).” A homegrown dirty-bomb threat has also emerged: in 2009, James Cummings, a neo-Nazi in Belfast, Maine, was discovered to have started collecting low-level nuclear materials.

The even-more-destructive terrorist-nuclear-weapons danger is looming on the horizon. Terrorists are not likely to be deterred by threats of retaliation. Stopping them from purchasing a nuclear weapon, or stealing one, or getting the materials to make their own is a much better strategy. If aspiring nuclear-weapons states—such as Iran and Syria (and some suspect Burma)—get nuclear weapons in the future, the danger that terrorists will get their hands on one will clearly increase. And if the United States and other nuclear-weapons nations are seen to be hypocritical, by not following our NPT commitments and maintaining that we (but only we) are responsible enough to have them, it will reduce the likelihood of ensuring the broad international cooperation that is needed to reduce these proliferation risks.

Officials in the George W. Bush administration believed that there was no link between U.S. arsenal size or military posture and nonproliferation decisions made by non-nuclear-weapons states. The Obama admin-
administration’s new Nuclear Posture Review maintains that the connection is strong, even if it is often indirect and hard to measure:

By demonstrating that we take seriously our NPT obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament, we strengthen our ability to mobilize broad international support for the measures needed to reinforce the non-proliferation regime and secure nuclear materials worldwide.

There are now many signs that the Obama administration is correct in its assessment that progress in disarmament enables progress in nonproliferation. The April 2010 Nuclear Security Summit brought forty-six countries to Washington where they reached agreement on a number of concrete steps to better protect nuclear materials from terrorists. And in stark contrast to the Bush-era 2005 NPT Review Conference, which ended in failure, the May 2010 review took place in a cooperative atmosphere and produced a final document that called on all states to sign onto improved safeguards for their reactors, and encouraged governments not in compliance with their treaty commitments to change their ways. The successful efforts to get additional rounds of sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council can be credited, in part, to the new spirit of cooperation, including the progress on arms-control agreements between the United States and China, and the United States and Russia.

Severe challenges to global zero remain. It will be critical that all states have increased confidence that final disarmament agreements will be enforced and that any new nuclear proliferator will not be tolerated. Fortunately, in a nuclear-free world, the former nuclear-weapons states would have far stronger mutual incentives to punish and reverse any new state’s decision to acquire atomic bombs. Ironically, it is precisely because nuclear-weapons states have such large arsenals today that they sometimes succumb to the temptation to accept new proliferators. In a disarmed world, such complacency would be more obviously imprudent, thus encouraging the once-nuclear-armed states to enforce nonproliferation.

Verification at zero (or at low numbers for that matter) is an obvious challenge. Even if better verification technology is created, there will remain the problem of what to do if an erstwhile nuclear nation is caught secretly preparing to rearm. A way around this is to accept the fact that all former nuclear-weapons states will retain the option of reversing course. Ironically, this capability will be both reassuring and deterring: reassuring because it enables states to begin taking the final steps toward total nuclear disarmament even in the absence of complete confidence that the process will be successful; deterring because each state will know that even if it can reverse its final disarmament steps, so can the others. In short, there will still be a latent form of nuclear deterrence even in a nuclear-disarmed world.

Finally, there is the question of ballistic-missile defenses. During and immediately after the Cold War, many saw these systems as “destabilizing” because as long as a government’s nuclear security was dependent on the ability to retaliate with devastating force after an attack, if an adversary hitting first could use even limited defenses to reduce the effective-
ness of second-strike retaliation, mutually assured destruction no longer held. Managed mutual-missile-defense deployments in the future could, however, permit the final steps of disarmament to take place with less concern about cheating in the immediate term and could provide more confidence in the ability of governments to respond in a timely manner to successful rule breaking by another state.

The nuclear-weapons-free world will not be a world free of conflicts of national interest; nor will it be a utopia in which governments never feel tempted to cheat on their international obligations. A world without nuclear weapons will not be a world without war. Indeed, the maintenance of global zero will require that conventionally armed major powers be prepared to enforce nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation commitments in a fair and vigorous manner. Potential proliferators may have to be “forced” to be free.

In medieval times, European mapmakers placed the words hic sunt dracones (here be dragons) at the edge of the known world. Disarmament critics today are like those medieval mapmakers, fearing that we are entering unknown territory fraught with hidden nuclear monsters. But these dragons are fantasies. The genuine strategic challenges we face in creating a secure nuclear-free world—adequate verification, enforcement of violations and mutual-defense deployments—are challenges that can be met over time. And the world we are heading toward if we fail to find safe paths to mutual and verifiable disarmament—a world crowded with nuclear-weapons states and terrorist temptations—is even more fraught with danger.

No: Kenneth N. Waltz

War may not pay, as British economist Norman Angell repeatedly claimed, but the lesson proved a hard one for states to learn. Even with the horrors of World War I fresh in their minds, European countries went into World War II just twenty-one years later. Until August of 1945, violent conflict punctuated the history of states, especially of those major and great.

When in short order the Soviet Union followed the United States into the nuclear business with “man of steel” Stalin and in due course “we will bury you” Khrushchev at the helm, many in the Western world thought that all hell would break loose. Robert Maynard Hutchins, boy president of the University of Chicago (he was thirty when he took over), and Bertrand Russell, eminent in mathematics and rhetoric, proclaimed that in the nuclear age, world government was the only alternative to world war. With nuclear weapons, war presumably meant that civilization would perish and we along with it. Instead, the alternative to world government proved to be nuclear deterrence, which banished war among the world’s major nations through the long years of the Cold War and ever since.

Kenneth N. Waltz is the Emeritus Ford Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Berkeley and senior research associate at Columbia University’s Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies. In 1999 he won the James Madison Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Political Science Association.
Certainly, violent conflict still exists, but it has been relegated to taking its course in the periphery of international politics. The United States, in particular, has been fond of beating up poor and weak states. In the twenty years dating from 1983, we invaded six of them, beginning and ending with Iraq. Yet since the end of World War II, states with nuclear weapons have never fought one another. Testing propositions against historical events has become a favorite indoor sport of social scientists. This is the only proposition that has passed every test. One might think that the best, in fact the only, peacekeeping weapon that the world has ever known would gain many fans. It does not seem to have done so.

We now have a president who wants to free us from the atomic bomb in the hope of making the world a safer place. This “zero option” has intuitive appeal. Nuclear weapons are immensely destructive. No defense against them is possible. Why then should states not band together and agree to abolish them? Why is the zero option not the best choice?

Abolishing the weapons that have caused sixty-five years of peace would certainly have effects. It would, among other things, make the world safe for the fighting of World War III. Like any dominant power, America is a looming threat in the minds of many a leader. When the president of the United States identified three countries—Iraq, Iran and North Korea—as forming an axis of evil, which President George W. Bush did in January of 2002, and when he then ordered the invasion of one of them, what were the other two to think? They had to believe that they might be next. What to do? How can any state hope to deter a world-dominant power? To build a conventional defense against the United States is impossible. Moreover, throughout history conventional deterrence has repeatedly failed. Nuclear weapons are the only weapons capable of dissuading the United States from working its will on other nations.

To suggest to other states that America’s willingness to shrink its nuclear arsenal should induce them to follow the example, or should persuade them to give up their efforts to become nuclear states, is fanciful. For in spite of much Obama rhetoric, the United States shows no intention of dropping its nuclear forces below the second-strike level. The president, speaking to the people of the Czech Republic, promised that we will “take concrete steps toward a world without nuclear weapons.” He then followed that statement with this one: “Make no mistake: As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies.” That is, we will, as we should, continue to maintain forces able to launch a devastating retaliatory blow even if struck first. Nuclear arsenals may be reduced to very small numbers, but if they remain at or above the second-strike level, the military relations of states continue unchanged.

If somehow world leaders blundered into an agreement to go to zero, what would any nuclear country with sensible leaders do? The answer can be given in one word: cheat. Nuclear weapons are small and light. They are easy to hide and easy to move. Nuclear warheads can be placed in small vans or small boats and sent across borders or into har-
bors. Because a ban on all nuclear weapons would be impossible to police and enforce, some countries would be tempted to break the rules. Since some might cheat, all would have a strong incentive to do so. Even worse, if the zero option were generally accepted, one state or another might eventually come to believe that it faced a threat to its very existence. A mad scramble to rearm with nuclear weapons would then take place. As Thomas C. Schelling long ago wrote, “Short of universal brain surgery, nothing can erase the memory of weapons and how to build them.”

With the dawn of the nuclear age, peace has prevailed among those who have the weapons or enjoy their protection. Those who like peace should love nuclear weapons. They are the only weapons ever invented that work decisively against their own use. Those who advocate a zero option argue in effect that we should eliminate the cause of the extensive peace the nuclear world has enjoyed.

India and Pakistan provide an object lesson. When they tested their warheads in May of 1998, journalists, academics and public officials predicted that war and chaos on the subcontinent would ensue. The result, as I expected, was to ensure a prolonged peace between countries that had fought three wars since independence and continued for a time to spill blood in the conflict over Kashmir.

That countries with nuclear capabilities do not fight wars against one another is a lesson we should have learned. The proposition has held exactly where the prospects for war seemed the brightest, for example, between the United States and the Soviet Union, between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, and between India and Pakistan. New nuclear states are often greeted with dire forebodings: Is the government stable? Are the rulers sensible? The answers may be disconcerting. Yet every new nuclear nation, however bad its previous reputation, has behaved exactly like all of the old ones. The effect of having nuclear weapons overwhelms the character of the states that possess them. Countries with nuclear weapons, no matter how mean and irrational their leaders may seem to be, no matter how unstable their governments appear to be, do not launch major conventional attacks on

other countries, let alone nuclear ones. Even conventional attacks can all too easily escalate out of control and lead to an exchange of nuclear warheads. With conventional weapons, countries worry about winning or losing. With nuclear weapons, countries worry about surviving or being annihilated. Nuclear weapons induce caution all around: think of the Cuban missile crisis, or think of the external behavior of China during the frightful decade of the Cultural Revolution.

These days, everyone favors transparency. On the nuclear front the United States is transparent enough. Transparently, it is in America’s interest to get would-be nuclear states to forego the capability. Transparently, it is in America’s interest to get presently nuclear states to reduce or, better yet, eliminate their warheads. We are after all the world’s dominant conventional power and have been for years. Are we willing to reduce the number of our nuclear weapons? Sure; we have far more warheads than deterrence requires. Would we be willing to reduce the number of our strategic warheads below what we think necessary for a second-strike capability? Obviously not. We are transparent on that one as well.

Sagan Responds

Kenneth Waltz served in the U.S. Army in World War II, became a leading proponent of realist “balance of power” theory during the Cold War, and has consistently maintained since then that new proliferators will also behave cautiously if they acquire the bomb. It is therefore not surprising to learn that Waltz fears that nuclear disarmament would “make the world safe for the fighting of World War III,” believes that the atomic bomb is the best “peacekeeping weapon” ever invented, and deduces that the Obama administration must, despite the president’s grand rhetoric, really have no intention of moving toward global zero. What is surprising is that Waltz exaggerates the peace-inducing effect of nuclear weapons, displays a strangely apolitical perspective on the causes of war, completely ignores the risks of nuclear terrorism and misrepresents Barack Obama’s statements about nuclear disarmament. Let me address these point by point.

Waltz claims that “states with nuclear weapons have never fought one another.” Wrong. India and Pakistan, after testing nuclear weapons in 1998, fought the 1999 Kargil War, in which over one thousand soldiers died. Moreover, the Kargil War occurred not despite Pakistan developing nuclear weapons but rather because Pakistan got the bomb. Pakistani generals thought that their new nuclear arsenal was a shield behind which they could safely sneak Pakistani soldiers into Indian-controlled Kashmir without triggering a war. They were wrong, dangerously wrong. And Waltz is wrong to ignore this history.

Waltz also notes that “even with the horrors of World War I fresh in their minds, European countries went into World War II.” This is apolitical political science. Didn’t Hitler and the Nazi Party’s ambition to create Lebensraum and gain mastery of Europe have something to do with the outbreak of
war? Poland, England and France did not just stumble into war in 1939 and 1940. They were attacked by an expansionist power led by a megalomaniac leader who did not fear the consequences of war. (Indeed, by 1945 Hitler thought the German people should be destroyed because they had proven themselves unworthy of his leadership.) If the United States faced an aggressive leader like Hitler today, I would certainly advocate the maintenance of a U.S. nuclear arsenal for the sake of deterrence. But we do not now face that kind of threat in Russia and China. And the possibility of leaders like Iran’s Ahmadinejad getting nuclear weapons is precisely why the United States should work with others to pressure would-be proliferators and prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

It is revealing that the word “terrorism” does not appear in Waltz’s essay. He may believe that terrorists’ interests in getting the bomb are exaggerated, or that governments can easily protect their arsenals from insider or outsider threats. But he is incorrect on both counts. Islamic jihadis, left-wing radicals and apocalyptic cults have all tried to get nuclear weapons. More proliferation will increase their chances of success. No wonder Waltz ignores this issue. He has no credible way to address it.

Waltz cites Obama’s Prague speech about America keeping nuclear weapons as long as others possess the same capability as evidence that we are not serious about disarmament. Wrong again. Obama was in fact emphasizing that the United States will not disarm unilaterally and that the process will take a significant amount of time. But if we can negotiate multilateral arms-reduction agreements and create new verification technology, safe and secure disarmament is possible. Waltz misinterprets Obama’s nod toward realism as hypocrisy.

Nuclear weapons have not been the best things since sliced bread. They have been a mixed blessing, a dangerous deterrent. The Cold War witnessed many close calls; new nuclear states will be even more prone to deterrence failures. Living with nuclear weapons was a perilous necessity in the past. It should not be repeated. Celebrating this dangerous condition is misguided.

Waltz Responds

In 1963 President John F. Kennedy famously speculated that by 1970 ten countries would be able to deploy nuclear weapons and by 1975, fifteen to twenty countries would have followed suit. In fact, the number of nuclear-weapons states peaked at ten when some of the successor states to the Soviet Union were born nuclear, then the number dropped to seven, and now it stands at nine with Pakistan and North Korea having joined what remains the world’s most exclusive club.

Why have nuclear weapons spread so slowly? The answer is found not in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty but in the fact that most countries feel sufficiently secure without adding nuclear weapons to their conventional arsenals. If a country believes that its secu-

rity depends on nuclear weapons, to prevent it from acquiring them becomes almost impossible. President George W. Bush among others announced that North Korea becoming a nuclear-weapons state would be “unacceptable.” Yet when North Korea developed a nuclear military capability, we quietly acquiesced. The alternative to acceptance would have been to attack North Korea’s nuclear facilities, and that would surely have been unacceptable.

Sagan emphasizes that verification and enforcement of an agreement to create a nuclear-free world would be required. If for a moment we imagine that Sagan’s hoped-for world without nuclear weapons could be realized, what would anyone do if a major state revealed that it had secretly rebuilt a considerable nuclear arsenal? Would someone then attack the reborn nuclear state using the only weapons it would have, that is, conventional ones? I think not.

Sagan, having rejected “legal niceties,” would instead rely on international pieties. If other countries believe that America is on the road to nuclear disarmament, they will presumably jump on the bandwagon. The problem is that no road leads from a world with a small number of nuclear-weapons states to a world with none. Sagan believes that if the world does not become nuclear weapons free it will soon be a world of many nuclear states. One wonders why. Many more states can make nuclear weapons than do. Why should one now expect a large number of new nuclear states to join the hitherto-exclusive club? The old answer was that states seek the prestige that members of the club enjoy. Little prestige, however, attaches to new nuclear states when countries like Pakistan and North Korea already have them. Strong states—the old Soviet Union and China—are no longer seen as threats. Sagan would have us transfer our worries to puny new nuclear states and terrorists. We used to worry about the strong; now we should worry about the weak.

Sagan emphasizes the perils that attend a world with many more nuclear states, thus increasing the chances that terrorists would be able to steal or buy nuclear devices. To find good words to say about terrorists is difficult. Terrorists are a big annoyance and may occasionally do a fair amount of damage. We all know about the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in which upwards of three thousand people perished. One thought, however, gives comfort: terrorists are incapable of rending the fabric of society and of occupying and administering territory. We should all heave a sigh of relief that strong adversaries have been replaced by weak ones. □