

# The Great Unraveling: The Decline of the Nuclear Normative Order



Nina Tannenwald  
Brown University  
ISODARCO  
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# What is the global nuclear order?

The distribution of nuclear capabilities (who has what?)

Norms and institutions (treaties, arms control) that provide a framework for behavior.

**Norms:** shared expectations about behavior

# The global nuclear normative order

Two components:

1. **Global nuclear order** (the haves vs. the have-nots)

Centered around the nuclear nonproliferation regime

**Key norms:** nonproliferation, disarmament

2. **The order among the 9 nuclear-armed states:**

Centered around relationships of deterrence and nuclear stability

**Key norms:** deterrence, non-use

Today, the global nuclear normative order is unraveling.

- Technological and political developments are eroding deterrence.
- Both deterrence and disarmament are deeply contested
- The nuclear taboo is under pressure
- The nuclear nonproliferation regime suffers a legitimacy deficit
- Arms control is discredited

# Explaining change in the nuclear order: Three perspectives

**1. Realism:** norms will shift when the underlying distribution of power shifts.

Nuclear norms will change as new nuclear powers rise and old ones decline, or as new military technologies develop and spread.

In this view, the NPT is doomed to fail because it cannot accommodate the rise and fall of great powers.

Stable deterrence is a direct function of secure second strike capabilities.

It is dominated by prudential, not rule-following, behavior.

# Explaining change in the nuclear order: Three perspectives

## 2. Liberal institutionalism:

Norms that are embedded in institutions are more robust.

This view would expect a little more staying power in the current normative order, especially in highly institutionalized areas such as the NPT.

BUT.....no comparably institutionalized “deterrence” or “disarmament” regime.

Also, the general weakening (elimination!) of arms control institutions and agreements.

# Explaining change in the nuclear order: Three perspectives

## **3. The norms perspective (constructivism):**

New norms can be created by transnational activism

– coalitions of civil society and non-nuclear states.

Example: 2017 Ban Treaty

**A normative strategy of disarmament**

# Explaining change in the nuclear order: Three perspectives

## 3. The norms perspective (constructivism):

Norm conflict or incoherence

Norm inconsistency

Norm contestation



# Explaining change in the nuclear order: Three perspectives

## 3. The norms perspective (constructivism):

**Norm conflict or incoherence** – when norms conflict

E.g. disarmament norms vs. norms that associate NW with great power status

**Norm inconsistency** – when norms are applied unevenly

e.g. India and Israel are treated more favorably than Iran

**Norm contestation** - different interpretations of the meaning of a particular norm

e.g. the competing interpretations of Art. IV on the “right” to peaceful nuclear energy

# The existing regime of nuclear restraint

## Four key norms:

deterrence

non-use

nonproliferation

disarmament

## Key procedural norms:

reciprocity

transparency

stability dialogues

## Other important norms:

no-explosive-testing

peaceful uses

nuclear safety and security

## Norms that have gone by the wayside:

Prohibitions on missile defense

Prohibitions on INF

Treaty-based arms control?

## Opposing norms:

Norms that associate nuclear weapons with prestige and great power status.

Nuclear “exceptionalism” – leaders’ views of their nations as somehow exceptional and thereby entitled to nuclear weapons.

# Today, the regime of nuclear restraint is eroding

- Multiple nuclear powers
- Return of great power rivalries
- Increased regional tensions in Europe and Asia
- Collapse of US-Russia security relationship
- New technological arms races

# The Deterrence Norm

Cold War: U.S and Soviet leaders sought to stabilize deterrence by embedding it in arms control and security cooperation agreements

U.S-Soviet relationship a “partial security regime”

Nuclear learning: nuclear weapons are for deterrence, not use

Key treaty: 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty



# The Deterrence Norm

Shared norms are part of what makes deterrence stable.



# Today, deterrence is being challenged from three directions

## 1. Technological developments –

New weapons technologies/entanglements – deterrence and defense more complex, less reliable in some areas

## 2. Political critique – “rogue” states (and terrorists) can’t be deterred

## 3. Ethical critique – deterrence is immoral

(Pope Francis and the humanitarian campaign)

Need to define what stability means in this new era.

But....no stability dialogues taking place.





# The norm of non-use (nuclear taboo)

Nuclear taboo - a normative inhibition against the first use of nuclear weapons.

(now codified in the 2017 Nuclear Ban Treaty)

# The CIA on the nuclear taboo in 1966

~~T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T~~

TS# 185929-e



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

*Cy. 13*

18 March 1966

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Use of Nuclear Weapons in the Vietnam War

## CONCLUSIONS

A. Use of nuclear weapons by the US in the Vietnam war would be one of the most important events of modern history. World reactions would be affected to some extent by the circumstances in which the US resorted to their use, and the targets attacked. But almost independent of these factors would be a widespread and fundamental revulsion that the US had broken the 20-year taboo on the use of nuclear weapons.

If the US used nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War, there would be:

“a widespread and fundamental revulsion that the US had broken the 20-year taboo on the use of nuclear weapons.”

The Obama administration's 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review*:

“It is in the U.S. interest and that of all other nations that the nearly [75]-year record of nuclear non-use be extended forever.”

Today, the nuclear taboo is under pressure



# Nuclear arsenal is there to be used, insists Narendra Modi

Saptarshi Ray, Delhi

April 23 2019, 12:01am,  
The Times

Asia

India

Terrorism



Narendra Modi has ramped up his rhetoric over national security, saying that India's nuclear arsenal is there to be used and that the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka showed that his firm leadership was needed.

Addressing a rally in Barmer, Rajasthan, which has a large number of ex-military personnel from a base nearby, India's prime minister said that the country's state weapons were not being "saved for Diwali", a Hindu festival traditionally marked by fireworks.

In contrast....in 2010:

We “support strengthening the six decade-old international norm of non-use of nuclear weapons.”

Joint Statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh,  
November 8, 2010

# Normative inconsistency: the nuclear powers and the nonproliferation norm

What's at stake: the NPT as a framework for pursuing mutually beneficial bargains.



# The Deeply Contested Disarmament Norm

Characterized by a vast disconnect between rhetoric and reality.

Also, institutional misalignment:

--the diplomats at NPT conferences are not the people making decisions about deterrence.





# Why Obama failed

Deteriorating US-Russian relations

The hawks in Congress did not like disarmament.

The Pentagon did not like disarmament.

The allies did not really like disarmament either.



# The Decline of Arms Control

Codified shared understandings of deterrence.

Goal : reduce threats, provide predictability,  
promote transparency

The beginning of the end: US withdrawal from  
the ABM Treaty in 2002.



# Life After Arms Control

In the absence of treaty-based arms control, how do we pursue nuclear restraint?

What norms do we want?

# Renewing a regime of nuclear restraint

- **Strong public statements:** World leaders should publically reaffirm commitment to non-use and the taboo (or Reagan-Gorbachev statement)
- New norm: **“No new deployments”**
  - Beyond New START limits
  - Of ground-based missiles abroad (both nuclear and conventional)
- **Dialogue** about conditions under which first-use would be morally acceptable

- **More public transparency** about how nuclear war plans meet humanitarian criteria.
- More accountability: Greater efforts – possibly organized by the UN – to **hold nuclear states accountable** for the possible consequences of their nuclear war plans and use.
- Redefine “responsible nuclear states” - should apply only to those states that have demonstrated a concrete commitment to disarmament.

The End