

# How Strong Is the Nuclear Taboo Today?

Since August 1945, when the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan in the closing days of WWII, no nation has employed nuclear weapons during war. Many people at the time fully expected that nuclear weapons would be used again after 1945. Yet, neither Presidents Harry Truman nor Dwight Eisenhower used nuclear weapons in the Korean War; Eisenhower refused requests to use nuclear weapons to bail out the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954; and President John F. Kennedy and Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev engaged in secret diplomacy to avoid a nuclear catastrophe during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Contrary to these early expectations, a 73-year tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons has arisen. This non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945 is the single most important feature of the nuclear age. A nuclear “taboo”—a normative inhibition against the first use of nuclear weapons—has emerged. It stems from a powerful sense of revulsion associated with such destructive weapons. Since its rise during the Cold War, the nuclear taboo has been embraced by the United Nations and by leaders and publics around the world as a norm of international politics. In an important summit statement in November 2010, U.S. President Barack Obama and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that “they support strengthening the six decade-old international norm of non-use of nuclear weapons.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, however, for the first time since the tensest days of the Cold War, the prospect that an American president might actually contemplate using nuclear

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 41:3 pp. 89–109  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1520553>

weapons against an adversary has become thinkable. President Donald Trump's threats in August 2017 to rain "fire and fury like the world has never seen" on North Korea, in response to that country's provocations, alarmed leaders and citizens around the world.<sup>2</sup> Trump did not use the word nuclear, but his over-the-top rhetoric in response to North Korea's growing nuclear and missile capabilities left open the possibility that it was a threat to carry out a nuclear first strike. The United States has never before overtly threatened a first—as opposed to retaliatory—use of nuclear weapons against North Korea.<sup>3</sup> Trump's bullying talk about using nuclear weapons, his enthusiastic embrace of a massive nuclear arms buildup, along with new research suggesting that American public opinion today is not particularly opposed to the use of nuclear weapons, raise troubling questions about the strength of normative restraints on using nuclear weapons in the United States today.<sup>4</sup>

In late 2007 I published a book, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945*, in which I traced the origins and rise of a nuclear taboo in international politics and its influence on the decision making of American leaders as they contemplated using nuclear weapons during international crises after 1945.<sup>5</sup> I argued that a normative inhibition, a taboo, played an important role in restraining U.S. leaders from resorting to first use of nuclear weapons during and after the Cold War. Although deterrence also played a role, without the emergence of this normative stigma since 1945, nuclear weapons might have been used again. Other scholars have investigated the role of the nuclear taboo in Britain, France, Israel, Japan, Pakistan and Russia.<sup>6</sup>

**The global nuclear normative order is unraveling.**

Ten years later, how strong is the taboo against use of nuclear weapons? Does it influence Trump and his advisers, an administration especially unsympathetic to norms and institutions? In this article, I revisit my original argument and evaluate the status of the nuclear taboo today. While the

taboo remains a widely-shared norm of the international community, it is under pressure from both the Trump administration and other nuclear-armed governments. Today, a new nuclear era is emerging—one of multiple nuclear powers, intersecting rivalries, increased regional tensions in Europe and Asia, and new technological arms races in both nuclear and nonnuclear systems. In this emerging nuclear era, key norms that have underpinned the existing nuclear order—most crucially deterrence, non-use and nonproliferation—are under stress. A new norm of disarmament has emerged but is deeply contested while other norms, such as arms control, are disappearing altogether. Most disturbingly, nuclear weapons are being relegitimized in states' security policies. In short, the global

nuclear normative order is unraveling. The nuclear taboo is at the core of this normative order.<sup>7</sup>

Assessing the precise strength or status of a norm at any given moment is difficult. Instead, it is more feasible to examine trends: that is, whether the taboo appears to be strengthening or weakening over time. Important sources of evidence for the nuclear taboo lie in states' nuclear policies and doctrines for use of nuclear weapons, institutions and agreements that embed norms of restraint, and perhaps most importantly, the changing way leaders and publics talk about nuclear weapons.

Several theoretical perspectives on international relations provide useful insights. Realists would argue that norms will shift when the underlying distribution of power shifts. In this view, nuclear norms will change as new nuclear powers rise and old ones decline, or as new military technologies develop and spread. And in the face of increasing great power tensions, or the emergence of new nuclear-armed states such as North Korea, norms of nuclear non-use might be expected to come under pressure. Liberal institutionalists, who emphasize the key role of institutions in embedding norms, would point to the general weakening of arms control institutions and agreements as sources of nuclear restraint. These include the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 and from the Iran agreement (JCPOA) in May 2018, the collapse of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program between the United States and Russia in 2014, and the likely impending demise of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. One can also point to the moribund state of the UN Conference on Disarmament, which is the main negotiating forum for multilateral arms control agreements, and deep political fissures in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). In short, arms control is disappearing as a source of nuclear restraint. Finally, constructivists, who emphasize the key role of discourse in the social construction of norms, would point to the role of bellicose nuclear threats in both normalizing nuclear weapons and raising the risks of nuclear war.

### **The Rise of the Nuclear Taboo and Its Effects**

In the decades following the U.S. use of atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, a nuclear taboo emerged as the result of both strategic interests and moral concerns. Its origins lie in policy precedents established in the immediate postwar period, both domestically in the United States and internationally at the United Nations, which marked out atomic weapons as different from conventional weapons. Several key mechanisms fostered the rise of the taboo. Most important, a global grassroots antinuclear movement, along with nonnuclear states and the

UN, actively sought to stigmatize nuclear weapons as unacceptable weapons of mass destruction. Additional factors included the restraining role of public opinion, the moral concerns of individual leaders, the advent of a situation of “mutually assured destruction,” the iterated behavior of non-use by nuclear states over time, and the acceptance of the taboo by successive national leaders worldwide.

The rise of a nuclear taboo has had three main effects on international politics. First, the taboo has made it impossible to view nuclear weapons as “just another weapon.” This shift in discourse is the single most important legacy of the global antinuclear weapons movement. The normative branding of nuclear weapons as “unacceptable” and “inhumane” weapons is strong today, and has been actively reinforced in recent years by the campaign at the UN that has sought to highlight the devastating humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons.

Second, the taboo has reinforced mutual deterrence between nuclear powers—that is, it has helped to undergird and reinforce stable nuclear deterrence. This effect is especially evident in the U.S.-Soviet/Russian arms control relationship. Deterrence relies on threats of use. Yet over time, U.S. and Soviet leaders came to realize that the overriding goal in a nuclear-armed world must be to avoid any use of such weapons. By embedding deterrence doctrine and practice in a

**The taboo is also fundamental to the future of the nuclear nonproliferation regime.**

set of regulative and constitutive norms (i.e. in various arms control agreements such as SALT, the 1972 ABM Treaty, and the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty), these agreements helped to stabilize the practice of non-use and legitimized “deterrence” rather than “use” as the appropriate role for the bomb. The taboo both grew out of and helped to reinforce this understanding.

Third, at the same time and more speculatively, the taboo has undermined deterrence between nuclear and nonnuclear states. General Chuck Horner, U.S. commander of the air war in the 1991 Gulf War, said in an interview after the war that the threat to use nuclear weapons against a nonnuclear state was no longer credible.<sup>8</sup> There is significant evidence that this view is quite widespread today. The fact that nonnuclear states have not been deterred from fighting nuclear-armed states (Vietnam versus the United States; Iraq versus the United States; Afghanistan versus the Soviet Union; Argentina versus Britain over the Falklands) suggests some empirical support for this position.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the taboo helps explain additional puzzles: why the legitimacy of making nuclear threats has declined over time, why even “small” (“tactical”)

nuclear weapons are regarded as immoral (the taboo is a prohibition on a whole class of weapons), and why there has been less nuclear proliferation than expected (a taboo reduces the value of nuclear arms). More broadly, the taboo—the sense that nuclear weapons are illegitimate—is also fundamental to the future of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. A prohibition regime cannot be sustained over the long haul by sheer force, coercion, or physical denial; it requires an internalized belief among its participants that the prohibited item is illegitimate and abhorrent. Conversely, a robust nonproliferation norm helps sustain the taboo. If the norm against possession erodes, this may put pressure on the taboo.

For example, North Korea's acquisition of nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities over the last 15 years, in violation of the NPT, has enabled a highly risky policy of nuclear threats and brinkmanship that has created fears of nuclear war on the Korean peninsula. This has put pressure on the taboo. Further, as William Potter, director of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, has pointed out, "the NPT is not as explicit as one might like in prohibiting the use of nuclear weapons, or even the threat of their use against non-nuclear states."<sup>10</sup> That is, while the NPT enshrines a strong norm against proliferation, it does not contain a strong legal barrier against violation of the taboo on use. For this reason, nonnuclear states have repeatedly called for legally binding "negative" security assurances—pledges not to use nuclear weapons against them—from nuclear weapons states. Nonnuclear states have also widely supported a legal ban on nuclear weapons and on the threat of their use (see more below).

Nevertheless, the delegitimization of nuclear weapons has always been incomplete. Although widespread support exists for further stigmatization of nuclear weapons—as the achievement of the nuclear ban treaty in July 2017 shows—the general opprobrium is far from universal. The nuclear powers themselves continue to believe firmly in the benefits of retaining their nuclear capabilities. Wider alliance systems such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continue to tout the great value of deterrence and first use as the basis for security, a position that has been revalorized today by Russia's intervention in Ukraine. When President Obama contemplated declaring a no-first-use policy in summer 2016, Japan and other allies under the U.S. nuclear "umbrella" pushed back in alarm.<sup>11</sup>

Today, nuclear weapons are being relegitimized in states' security policies, a development underway even before the Trump administration. The renewed salience of nuclear weapons in the NATO–Russia confrontation, the heightened U.S.–North Korea tensions, along with a frightening new rhetoric of nuclear

**Nuclear weapons are being relegitimized in states' security policies, even before the Trump administration.**

use, are putting pressure on the taboo. Like Trump and Kim Jong Un, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been rattling the nuclear saber—issuing veiled nuclear threats against NATO states and touting Russia’s arsenal. In a March 2018 speech heavily devoted to showcasing Russia’s new strategic weapons, he announced an “invincible” new cruise missile accompanied by a computer animation showing missiles hitting the coast of Florida.<sup>12</sup> All the nuclear-armed states—United States, Russia, France, Britain, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea—are modernizing their nuclear arsenals. Several appear to be lowering the threshold for use of nuclear weapons in their doctrines and policy. None of these trendlines are good for the taboo. The Trump administration has exacerbated them.

### **The Trump Administration and the Nuclear Taboo**

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The Trump administration has sought to roll back numerous Obama-era policies, including those on nuclear weapons. Although President Obama was largely unsuccessful in carrying out the promise of his 2009 Prague speech on disarmament, and he did launch an expensive modernization program, he went farther than any other president in strengthening the taboo. This included putting disarmament on the world’s agenda (for which he won—controversially—the Nobel Peace Prize), reserving nuclear weapons for use only in “extreme circumstances,” considering a no-first-use policy, and especially, talking publicly about the value of the norm of non-use, what I call “taboo talk.”

In stark contrast, Trump appears either indifferent to, or ignorant of, existing nonproliferation, disarmament and non-use norms. His bellicose nuclear threats upend decades of presidential caution in talking about nuclear weapons. His administration has failed to declare its obligation under the NPT to pursue disarmament, something all previous presidents since the 1970s have done. He is also notably uninterested in arms control: While the United States and Russia have reduced their weapons by about 80 percent from the height of the Cold War, no announcement about extending the 2010 New START agreement came out of the Trump-Putin summit on July 16, 2018. New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) is an arms control agreement in which the two countries agreed to cut deployed strategic nuclear warheads and bombs by about one third and launchers by one half. The treaty will expire in three years. If the two presidents do not extend New START, then after 2021 for the first time in 50 years there will be no limits at all on the numbers of Russian and U.S. nuclear weapons. This is a recipe for a destabilizing arms race. Further, in May 2018, Trump pulled the United States out of the landmark 2015 agreement to constrain Iran’s nuclear program, despite widespread support for the agreement by almost the entire rest of the world. If the Europeans are unable to hold up their end of the

agreement without the United States, leading to the collapse of the deal, Iran's nuclear program will be constrained only by the norms and weaker monitoring provisions of the NPT. Uncertainties about Iran's nuclear intentions could provoke a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

The Trump administration's *Nuclear Posture Review*, released in February 2018, represents a giant leap backward for the nuclear taboo.<sup>13</sup> It embraces the outdated view that nuclear superiority matters. It betrays a deep skepticism that North Korea or even Russia is rational enough to be deterred by the 6,550 weapons of the still-massive U.S. nuclear arsenal that could catapult both countries back to the Stone Age. The report calls for maintaining a robust nuclear stockpile and for expanding the "flexibility and range" of U.S. nuclear weapons at a cost of over \$1 trillion. This includes the development of new "low yield" nuclear weapons and acceptance of more ways to use them, including widening the rules on using them first. This could include responding to large-scale cyberattacks with nuclear weapons, a policy that previous presidents had rejected. U.S. pursuit of smaller, more discriminate nuclear warheads that are less destructive may reduce inhibitions on using them.

**The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review represents a giant leap backward for the nuclear taboo.**

Yet perhaps reflecting the influence of the taboo, Pentagon officials—many of whom are veterans of numerous administrations and are likely to have internalized the reality of "mutually assured destruction"—have carefully defended the expansive plans as merely strengthening deterrence. They repeatedly insist—implausibly—that the Trump nuclear doctrine is merely a continuation of Obama's policy. But in its implausibility, the claim pays deference to the taboo. When Secretary of Defense James Mattis, previously skeptical about the need for new weapons, was asked if the new smaller nuclear weapon would make the military more likely to use nuclear weapons, he insisted that the goal of the new weapon was deterrence.<sup>14</sup> He also told the House Armed Services Committee that "I don't think there is any such thing as a 'tactical nuclear weapon.' Any nuclear weapon used any time is a strategic game-changer."<sup>15</sup> Mattis' comment made clear that he did not think there was any meaningful distinction between so-called "tactical" and strategic nuclear weapons. Rather, any use of nuclear weapons would move you into an entirely new world. The only clear dividing line is between use and non-use. Numerous former defense and national security officials have publicly pushed back against the expansive vision contained in the posture review.

Nevertheless, Trump's most direct effect on the nuclear taboo is to dramatically change the discourse surrounding nuclear weapons. Trump's exchange of bellicose

nuclear rhetoric with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un risked dangerously normalizing the possibility of a nuclear first strike. In August 2017, Trump vowed to rain down “fire and fury like the world has never seen” on North Korea if it posed a threat to the United States.<sup>16</sup> In September 2017, he stunned the UN General Assembly with the warning that he would “totally destroy North Korea” if the United States were forced to defend itself or its allies.<sup>17</sup> On January 1, 2018, Kim Jong Un began the New Year with a taunt that his nuclear button was always on his desk. Trump tweeted in response the next day, “Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!” North Korea’s official news agency responded that Trump’s tweet was “the spasm of a lunatic.”<sup>18</sup>

The recklessness of this situation defies belief. When the world’s leading democracy demonstrates willful disrespect for the longstanding norms of non-use and nonproliferation (during the campaign Trump suggested that Japan and South Korea should get nuclear weapons of their own), it sets a particularly damaging example. Trump’s hints of preventive nuclear war against North Korea undermined decades of shared understandings about both mutual nuclear deterrence and the taboo.

If there is a silver lining, it is that Trump’s behavior has likely put a sizeable dent in the “orientalist” discourse that non-Western nuclear states are irrational, while Western states are “responsible” nuclear powers.<sup>19</sup> This has led to the most serious scrutiny of U.S. nuclear use procedures in decades. Alarmed members of Congress called for review of the president’s unilateral authority to launch nuclear weapons.<sup>20</sup> In November 2017, for the first time in 41 years, a congressional foreign affairs committee held a hearing to examine who in the U.S. government has the authority to order the use of nuclear weapons. Nuclear war may not be one tweet away, but as the Senate Foreign Relations committee learned, there is not much standing in the way of a commander-in-chief determined to fire nuclear weapons. At the hearing, General Robert Kehler, a former head of Strategic Command, responsible for the nation’s nuclear deterrent, stated publicly that “if there is an illegal order presented to the military, the military is obligated to refuse to follow it.” As he explained, an illegal use of nuclear weapons would be one that failed to adhere to “the basic legal principles of military necessity, distinction and proportionality.” These principles apply “to nuclear weapons just as they do to every other weapon.”<sup>21</sup>

The subsequent discussion, however, revealed that, in practice, given the highly destructive nature of nuclear weapons, what constitutes an illegal use of such weapons might be quite unclear. Further, under questioning, it became evident that if the president determined to override his top nuclear commander, a constitutional crisis might ensue.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the exchange did suggest

that, for the military at least, there is such a thing as an illegal nuclear war, and there would be some restraints on a first strike. Finally, thanks to Trump, there has been more news coverage of the nuclear taboo and the tradition of non-use than we have had in years: numerous news publications (including this one) have run articles on it.

It is possible that Trump's nuclear brinkmanship was intended to strengthen deterrence, even if its rhetoric went far beyond that of other American presidents, who have generally spoken exceedingly cautiously when wielding the nuclear arsenal. After all, all American presidents in the post-WWII era have relied on the threat of overwhelming destruction.<sup>23</sup> It is also possible that Trump's bellicose threats played a role in getting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to agree to meet South Korean President Moon Jae-in in a historic summit on April 27, 2018, and subsequently Trump himself in June 2018 in Singapore. (Kim Jong Un publicly denied this link. North Korea's view is that its development of intercontinental missiles got Trump to agree to a summit. Most likely, Trump's threats of nuclear war on the Korean peninsula frightened President Moon and the South Korean public the most).

Yet the "madman" model of diplomacy, while it may possibly have had short-term benefits in this case, has significant long-term costs. It risks normalizing the use of catastrophically destructive weapons. We do not want to live in a world in which nuclear brinkmanship is treated as a routine way of doing business and people become complacent about nuclear use. As a model of governance, the madman approach is highly risky. Of course, it is unclear whether Trump is really aware of the effects any use of nuclear weapons would have. His nuclear threats drew strong condemnations both in the United States and abroad. Aaron David Miller, a former adviser to several secretaries of state, said that "Trump plays with the subject so carelessly and recklessly as if it were some kind of video game."<sup>24</sup> A former Bush administration official lumped Trump and Kim Jong Un together as "two psychologically unfit men crowing about their nukes."<sup>25</sup> Analysts, the media, and public discourse increasingly frame Trump as childlike or mentally ill, and therefore—like Kim Jong Un—"outside the pale" and not someone whose views or behavior should establish a precedent.<sup>26</sup> Such a framing will be essential to preserving the nuclear taboo going forward.

## **U.S. Public Opinion**

Equally troubling, some opinion surveys in the United States suggest that the taboo is weakening among the public. Political scientists Scott Sagan, Benjamin Valentino, and Daryl Press, employing various kinds of survey experiment scenarios, have found that a significant portion of the American public would

support a nuclear strike against an enemy that attacked the United States with conventional weapons or to save the lives of U.S. troops.<sup>27</sup> In one finding, 60 percent of Americans would support a nuclear attack on Iran that would kill 2 million civilians, if it prevented an invasion that might kill 20,000 American soldiers.<sup>28</sup>

These findings are worrisome. They are independent of the Trump effect, since this research was conducted before his administration. If the American public's

**The American public's antipathy toward nuclear use appears to be waning today.**

antipathy to nuclear use is waning today, this eliminates what has been, historically, an important source of restraint. What might explain this? The reasons are not totally clear and warrant further research, but it may be connected to a process of "nuclear forgetting."<sup>29</sup> As memories of Hiroshima fade, and the generations who lived through that moment pass on, people's inhibitions on using nuclear weapons may erode. Second, these findings may be connected to the general downward pressure on all international norms of restraint since 9/11

exerted by the perceived need to fight the so-called global war on terror. Some of the survey scenarios were tough tests for the taboo—cases involving the terrorist group Al Qaeda where it would be most likely to expect that the "gloves are off." Third, today the taboo may be increasingly an elite phenomenon—that is, a view held primarily by elites in the U.S. government and the military and perhaps in some segments of the broader public. While these survey findings are incomplete, they contribute to an overall picture of lowered thresholds for use and a fraying of normative restraints. Trump's nuclear saber rattling undoubtedly further contributes to this "normalization" of nuclear weapons.

### **Beyond the United States**

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Things do not look much better in some of the other nuclear-armed states. Especially troubling is the renewed salience of nuclear weapons in the NATO-Russia confrontation along with a frightening new rhetoric of nuclear use. Russia, aware of its conventional military inferiority vis-à-vis NATO, talked openly about putting nuclear weapons on alert during the Crimea operation in 2014, deployed nuclear-capable missiles to Kaliningrad in 2015, and has even made nuclear threats against NATO member states.<sup>30</sup> NATO is responding by strengthening its deterrent and promoting its plans for ballistic missile defenses, which only continues the cycle.<sup>31</sup> Igor Ivanov, a former Russian foreign minister who now runs a Russian government think tank, said in March 2016 that "The

risk of confrontation with the use of nuclear weapons in Europe is higher than in the 1980s.”<sup>32</sup> Former U.S. secretary of defense William J. Perry has been airing similar concerns, emphasizing the risks of a lack of ongoing dialogue between the United States and Russia.<sup>33</sup>

The lowered threshold for use is also reflected in some of the nuclear-armed states’ nuclear doctrines. The doctrines of several countries today increase the salience of nuclear weapons in security policy, blur the line between nuclear and conventional weapons, and emphasize “early” use as opposed to last resort in extreme circumstances. For example, analysts debate whether Russia plans to rely on a so-called “escalate to de-escalate” strategy—a limited nuclear strike involving a few low-yield nuclear weapons in response to large-scale aggression with conventional weapons by NATO. The goal would be to frighten the United States into ending the conflict on terms favorable to Moscow (Russia, for its part, believes that it is the United States that has lowered the bar for nuclear use).<sup>34</sup> China, in contrast, continues to maintain its no-first-use policy and a nuclear retaliatory capability based on a relatively small force and a second-strike posture, but it is also modernizing its arsenal.<sup>35</sup>

Whether the taboo operates in the newer nuclear states is a pressing question. If one factor strengthening the taboo in a state is a long period of non-use, then the taboo will be inherently less powerful in the new nuclear states. Pakistan’s “escalate to de-escalate” strategy, a highly risky posture that MIT Professor Vipin Narang has labeled “asymmetric escalation,” threatens early use of battlefield nuclear weapons in response to an Indian attack with conventional weapons.<sup>36</sup> Like China, India has also resisted concepts of deterrence that rely on nuclear war-fighting capabilities and counterforce targeting. Yet if it moves toward multiple-warhead missiles, then this strategic restraint will disappear.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, India already appears to be in a state of doctrinal drift away from its “credible minimum deterrent” posture, and some analysts suggest that India may move away from its no-first-use doctrine.<sup>38</sup> Because of unresolved tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, as well as escalatory doctrines, the risk of nuclear use is increasing in South Asia.<sup>39</sup>

North Korea appears to be an intriguing case for the taboo. On one hand, North Korean leaders’ penchant for threatening preemptive strikes suggests that they think nuclear weapons are usable. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has accelerated the nuclear weapons program with a torrent of bomb and ballistic missile tests, threatening South Korea and the United States with a “nuclear sword of justice.”<sup>40</sup> Along with Russia and Pakistan, North Korea likely believes that nuclear weapons

**Whether the taboo operates in the newer nuclear states is a pressing question.**

are a legitimate means to deter and counter a conventional threat, a retreat from the view that nuclear weapons should be used only to deter other nuclear weapons. Like other nuclear-armed states that face a conventionally superior adversary, North Korea may be planning to rely on an “asymmetric escalation” strategy against the United States.<sup>41</sup> Still, the most likely route to nuclear war on the Korean peninsula is through accident or miscalculation and an escalating tit-for-tat between the United States and North Korea.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, it has become increasingly clear that North Korea’s goal is to become accepted—like India—as a “normal” nuclear power. This means embracing the ostensible norms of “responsible” nuclear powers, including nonproliferation, disarmament, and the nuclear taboo. In a statement released on April 20, 2018 in the run-up to a first-ever meeting with South Korean president Moon Jae-in, Kim Jong Un stated, “we will never use nuclear weapons unless there is a nuclear threat or nuclear provocation to our country.” Kim added that North Korea “will not transfer nuclear weapons and nuclear technology.” In announcing that North Korea was dismantling its nuclear test site, he added that “the suspension of nuclear testing is an important process for global nuclear disarmament” and that North Korea would join international efforts to “halt nuclear testing altogether.”<sup>43</sup> Of course, these statements are very general (and North Korea acquired its own nuclear arsenal in violation of the NPT). Nevertheless, in signaling North Korea’s willingness to embrace key international norms, they provide remarkable evidence of North Korea’s goal to be accepted as a “normal” nuclear power. Still, the penchant for erratic behavior on the part of both Trump and Kim Jong Un makes for a worrisome combination in the event of increasing tension over North Korea’s nuclear program.

Finally, although Iran is not a nuclear power, its prior pursuit of nuclear weapons and its vitriolic rhetoric against Israel certainly raise concerns about whether Iranian leaders are influenced by the taboo. Yet, they have stated at various times that nuclear weapons are “un-Islamic.”<sup>44</sup> The country’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued a fatwa in 2004 describing the use of nuclear weapons as immoral. In a subsequent sermon, he declared that “developing, producing or stockpiling nuclear weapons is forbidden under Islam.”<sup>45</sup> In 2008, he repeated this after a meeting with the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohammed El Baradei.<sup>46</sup>

We need not take the Iranians at face value, of course. But as Fareed Zakaria, prominent international affairs journalist and columnist, has pointed out, “it seems odd for a regime that derives its legitimacy from its fidelity to Islam to declare constantly that these weapons are un-Islamic” if it intends to acquire and be ready to use them.<sup>47</sup> As a strategy of disarmament diplomacy and domestic norm internalization, NPT member states might hold Iranian leaders to these statements.

## Will the Nuclear Ban Treaty Strengthen the Taboo?

In an important development, in July 2017 the United Nations adopted for the first time ever a legal prohibition on nuclear weapons, without the support of the nuclear powers. This Nuclear Prohibition Treaty, or Ban Treaty as it is more commonly known, outlaws all aspects of nuclear weapons including their use and threat of use, testing, development, possession, sharing and stationing in a different country. One hundred twenty-two nations—all nonnuclear—voted to adopt the treaty. Only the Netherlands voted against, and Singapore officially abstained. It will enter into force when 50 states have ratified it. So far, 15 have.

For supporters of the treaty, increasingly frustrated by the nuclear-powers' foot dragging on disarmament, the goal of the ban treaty was simply to declare nuclear weapons illegal, just as chemical and biological weapons are, and thereby strengthen the international norms against use and possession of nuclear weapons. It was an explicit effort "to codify under international law the 'nuclear taboo' or moral imperative not to use nuclear weapons."<sup>48</sup> The hope is that this will foster a domestic political debate about nuclear weapons especially in the democratic nuclear weapons states.<sup>49</sup>

Unfortunately, as with other multilateral arms control measures these days, this treaty will lack key parties. The nuclear-armed states and U.S. NATO allies boycotted the negotiations, and the nuclear powers made clear that they are not bound by the resulting treaty.<sup>50</sup> The Trump administration has largely continued the Obama administration's policy of opposition to the treaty, although it expresses more hostility to the ban activists themselves.

By the standards of traditional international politics, the ban treaty represents a significant achievement. The ban campaign was largely led by small and medium-sized states, working closely with civil society activists. The fact that they were able to mobilize support for a treaty despite intense opposition from the nuclear-armed states suggests widespread dissatisfaction with the nuclear status quo. As one advocate put it, "[Y]ou cannot wait for the smokers to institute a smoking ban."<sup>51</sup> This effort continued the historical pattern of antinuclear advocacy that I outlined in *The Nuclear Taboo* in which nonnuclear states and civil society activists, often aided by the UN, push forward the nuclear taboo.<sup>52</sup> In December 2017, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the main civil society group, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their key role in achieving the ban treaty.

Does the ban strengthen the nuclear taboo? Yes, although it also poses some risks. Since its disarmament and verification provisions are thin by design, the ban treaty is best seen as a stigmatization, rather than a disarmament, treaty. One of its main effects will be to provide a focal point for future antinuclear

activism. The treaty's prohibition on threats of nuclear weapons use directly challenges deterrence policies. It will likely complicate policy options for U.S. allies under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, who are accountable to their parliaments and civil societies. For example, although all NATO member governments have formally

**The Nuclear Ban Treaty strengthens the nuclear taboo, although it also poses some risks.**

opposed the ban treaty, antinuclear sentiment remains quite strong in Europe. The NATO defense establishments are already worried. As a recent report on a conference in Britain to discuss how to strengthen deterrence strategy reluctantly acknowledged, "the ban treaty has significant support in many NATO countries." The report expressed concern that some European countries are "deeply ambivalent" about nuclear weapons, and lamented that "in some countries, a strong taboo has formed around the discussion of nuclear

weapons and nuclear deterrence."<sup>53</sup> In the view of the report, such antinuclear sentiments will pose an obstacle to effective NATO deterrence policies. The ban treaty will likely exacerbate these political fissures.

The ban treaty may also have implications for where the United States can base its overseas nuclear weapons, and where its nuclear-armed ships and submarines can navigate. Once it achieves 100 or so ratifications (so far, 60 states have signed and 15 have ratified it), it will carry significant legal weight. The ban treaty may not result in the physical destruction of nuclear weapons anytime soon, but it forces a renewed discourse of non-use and non-possession and puts the nuclear powers on the defensive about the humanitarian consequences of their weapons.

Nevertheless, the ban treaty does pose some risks. One is that it could provoke the nuclear-armed states to articulate more zealously why they continue to need nuclear weapons. That is, rather than drawing them into the discourse of stigmatization and taboo, it could provoke more talk about the continued value of nuclear weapons. Second, the ban treaty does have some flaws. For example, it does not require signatories to be members in good standing of the NPT. Further, the ban treaty may increase the growing rift in the nuclear nonproliferation regime between the nuclear and nonnuclear states. This poses a real risk for the future viability of the NPT, the most important multilateral treaty for nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. However, the fact that the nonnuclear states pursued the humanitarian campaign in the first place is a result of the decline of the normative authority of the NPT as a disarmament mechanism.<sup>54</sup> For this, we have the nuclear powers to thank. By failing to pursue disarmament seriously, the nuclear-armed states turned what was supposed to be a long-term transformation regime (to a nuclear-free world) into a regime that too blatantly maintains

the status quo of haves and have-nots in the interests of the haves. This has undermined the NPT as a disarmament mechanism. Finally, if the ban treaty fails to eventually achieve the 50 ratifications to bring it into force, it could increase cynicism about international law.

The key long-term challenge for the ban treaty is to change the view that nuclear weapons are the currency of power.<sup>55</sup> This will be exceedingly difficult. It will require a much broader cultural and political project than simply the ban treaty itself, though that treaty is an important piece. One of the challenges to further delegitimizing nuclear weapons is that there is no widespread grassroots antinuclear movement today the way there was in the 1950s, and again in the 1980s when the nuclear freeze movement took over college campuses. Despite the central involvement of civil society groups in the ban movement, the campaign itself was largely an elite and interest group phenomenon. Millions of citizens are not out rallying in the street today to reduce nuclear dangers. American newspapers gave very little coverage to the ban treaty and most Americans do not even know it exists.

Instead, thanks to Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump, nuclear weapons are being celebrated as symbols of national power (with buttons and bigger buttons). Should Trump and Kim Jong Un manage to scare people half to death with their nuclear brinkmanship, this might create the kind of impetus for revival of a grassroots antinuclear movement.

### **Will the Taboo Last?**

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Because of renewed major power rivalry, bellicose rhetoric, fading memories of Hiroshima, and increasing reliance on nuclear weapons in nuclear states' military doctrines, the nuclear taboo is under pressure. There are some developments that seek to strengthen it, such as the nuclear ban treaty. The possessors of nuclear weapons are themselves the ones whose policies are eroding the taboo. As the world's leading democracy and also most powerful nuclear state, the United States remains central to the taboo. As in many other areas of politics and diplomacy, the United States plays a key role in setting normative standards. Most of the rest of the world has been alarmed by Trump's nuclear brinkmanship. The pushback domestically and internationally against Trump's nuclear tweets suggests a widespread recognition of the dangers of normalizing nuclear weapons. The more bizarre and seemingly out of touch with reality he appears, the easier it is to frame his behavior as aberrant and not precedent-setting.

Despite downward pressures on the taboo, the belief that nuclear weapons should not be used continues to be widely shared. Efforts continue by civil society and nonnuclear states to further delegitimize the weapons and strengthen

the taboo. Most difficult to know is how robust the taboo is in the face of strategic pressures. The Trump era has increased awareness that the restraints on nuclear use by a U.S. president are less robust than previously thought. It is clear that the non-use of nuclear weapons continues to depend disproportionately on the steadiness of individual leaders who are guided by both norms and rationality.<sup>56</sup>

In these circumstances, sustaining the taboo requires active measures to reaffirm it. In addition to dealing with the underlying strategic tensions, leaders of nuclear-

**Sustaining the taboo requires active measures to reaffirm it.**

armed states should publicly reaffirm commitment to the taboo. This would include strong public statements from world leaders about the value of the taboo (“taboo talk”).<sup>57</sup> For example, as former Acting Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas Countryman has suggested, Presidents Trump and Putin should be able to say the same thing that Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev said in

1985: “that nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought.”<sup>58</sup> Leaders of the other nuclear-armed states should join them. Citizens and journalists in India, Pakistan, and Russia should pose questions about the taboo to their national leaders. Pilgrimages to Hiroshima, such as President Obama’s historic visit in 2016, the first time a sitting American president ever visited, are important symbolic commitments to “never again.”

Congress should continue to review the president’s unilateral authority to launch nuclear weapons and should establish policies to lengthen “decision time” for any nuclear launch. This refers to the amount of time the president has, following warning of a nuclear attack on the United States or its allies, to decide whether to respond with a nuclear strike. Congress should also support legislation that requires Congress to be involved in any U.S. first use of nuclear weapons. The United States and Russia should reestablish a dialogue and work together to eliminate capabilities and force postures of the Cold War that generate fears of a disarming first strike; India and Pakistan should do the same.

Additional measures that would strengthen the taboo include reduction in the role of nuclear weapons in security policies, ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and education to enhance public knowledge about the effects of nuclear weapons. Finally, efforts to institutionalize the taboo should be supported—the nuclear powers must find a constructive way to engage with the ban treaty. One important measure would be for the other nuclear powers to join China and India in adopting “no-first-use” policies.<sup>59</sup> As a first step in this direction, leaders of nuclear-armed states should establish a dialogue about the conditions under which a first use of nuclear weapons would be morally acceptable.<sup>60</sup>

The taboo has survived for 73 years. We should do everything possible to make sure it survives forever.

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