

# Nuclear Weapons: A Long-Overdue Conversation

*by Matthieu Calame*

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**The destructive potential of nuclear weapons makes states “responsible” and helps stave off a Third World War; the process of triggering the bomb is controlled; proliferation must be avoided, but our nuclear arsenal must be modernized. If we are to dispel the myths surrounding nuclear weapons, a debate is needed.**

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Reviewed: Benoît Pelopidas, *Repenser les choix nucléaires. La séduction de l'impossible*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2022, 308 pp., €23.

Because of its terrifying power, the atomic bomb was conceived as a weapon of deterrence during the Cold War. It was intended to be used only in defense, to prevent a fatal attack. As such, it is a weapon of "non-use". Herein lies the paradox: if we are ever forced to use nuclear warheads, it will be because they have not fulfilled their strategic role. In other words, deterrence will have failed.

## Vertical proliferation

Standard doctrine states that, for over half a century, nuclear deterrence was a critical factor, if not the critical factor, in ensuring that the confrontation between the USA and the USSR did not degenerate into a Third World War. In other words, if the war remained "cold", it was thanks to nuclear weapons. However, this narrative has

been seriously undermined by recent events in the Ukraine along with Russia's use of the nuclear threat as a cover for its war of annexation, making Benoît Pelopidas' book particularly topical.

The author seeks to subject the broad narrative of the atomic bomb to a factual and critical analysis by comparing its talking points—disseminated by the authorities, reproduced as such by the media, and extensively defended by experts—with the reality of the data and events that are known, despite the culture of secrecy surrounding nuclear weapons.

The first talking point concerns the existence of a phenomenon of "horizontal" proliferation, in which a growing number of countries are seeking to acquire nuclear warheads, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Only, the pursuit of nuclear weapons was far more ambitious in the 1950s! Back then, even Switzerland was seeking to build its own bomb, and what is more, the USA and its allies played a greater role in the proliferation of nuclear weapons than the Soviet Union. Indeed, there has in fact been a historically well-documented move towards deceleration. Today, fewer and fewer countries are seeking to acquire nuclear weapons.

The African continent even signed the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, which was made possible when South Africa ended its nuclear weapons program in 1989. Vertical proliferation, on the other hand, is alive and well, with the handful of nuclear powers—nine in all—continuing to develop their arsenal by adapting to nuclear warheads of different power or developing new delivery systems. The proliferation narrative serves two purposes in nuclear-armed countries: to mask vertical proliferation, and to render the process of disarmament inconceivable.

The second talking point concerns technological irresistibility, whereby the only countries to have given up on nuclear weapons are those that did not have the means to develop them in the first place. It is assumed that any country that can develop this technology will do so—the author calls this "capability determinism"—and will inevitably build up a nuclear arsenal. However, this assumption ignores any political role in the decision to develop a nuclear weapon and, of course, ignores other options, including those relating to defense.

Interestingly, many countries that had the necessary expertise, or could access it, eventually gave up on a nuclear program in favor of other, more effective strategies. Indeed, many critics of nuclear programs have come from military circles; they argue that the effort required would detract from other, more effective types of technology.

Conversely, countries with weaker economies, such as Pakistan, North Korea and Libya, have sought to acquire nuclear weapons and, in the case of the first two, have succeeded—though not without considerable effort.

The pursuit of nuclear weapons is based on a strategic and political position and analysis, rather than an a priori capability. In a chicken-and-egg logic, it becomes difficult to know whether a country is developing a nuclear bomb because it is under threat, or whether it is under threat because it is developing a nuclear bomb. Nuclear weapons appear to be part of a growing political conflict. The purpose of the theory of technological irresistibility is to justify interference, monitoring activities and asymmetrical supervision of weapons programs.

## **An "extended" nuclear deterrent**

The third talking point concerns the idea that technological irresistibility has led to the development of the "shock" theory as a condition for disarmament. Given that any country capable of acquiring nuclear weapons will do so if left to its own devices, only a "shock" can dissuade it from doing so. This shock may take the form of targeted assassinations of leaders or key players in weapons acquisition programs, or even, in the case of Iraq, the invasion of the country and the overthrow of its regime.

However, the case of Libya, as analyzed by Benoît Pelopidas, shows that this theory does not hold true. As long as the Libyan regime is in political conflict and feels threatened, it will seek to acquire nuclear weapons and will only give them up once the conflict has been resolved. In short, it is the threat of a shock that drives the pursuit of nuclear missiles, rather than the other way round. It is worth noting that, in direct contradiction to this theory, the removal of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 took place after he had renounced his quest for nuclear weapons, which can only have strengthened the determination of other regimes, such as North Korea.

In the proliferation paradigm, the only option for a country forced to give up its nuclear weapons program is to place itself under the protection of a nuclear power as part of an "extended" nuclear deterrent. However, this is not what happens in the vast majority of countries, which do not have such agreements, nor do they seek them. Moreover, this narrative fails to address the very serious doubts that countries holding such agreements have about the effectiveness of this protection.

Such misgivings were expressed by Norway, which, although a member of NATO, did not wish to host nuclear weapons. On the one hand, the country considered it doubtful that the United States would take the risk of waging a nuclear war in the event that Russia invaded Norway; and on the other hand, if a nuclear war scenario did eventually play out, the presence of such weapons on its soil would make the country a prime target if Russia wanted to crush America's ability to retaliate. In other words, Norway felt threatened by the presence of the so-called protector's weapons!

If the United Kingdom and France sought to acquire nuclear weapons early on, it was partly for reasons of imperial prestige, and partly because both countries doubted whether the United States had any real intention of using them in the event of a conventional war in Europe. The history of the French atomic bomb also shows that there is a long road from having nuclear weapons to having a credible deterrent. At best, it was only from 1979 onwards that France's nuclear arsenal acquired a degree of credibility. By then, the peak of the Cold War had already passed.

A final talking point invalidated by the facts concerns the claim of total control over the triggering process, supposedly achieved through the elimination of contingencies. In other words, if no nuclear war has ever broken out, it is thanks to a kind of rationality attached to this ultimate weapon: technical rationality and political rationality that border on infallibility. Its unprecedented destructive potential is said to render it "responsible".

However, in the still very short history of nuclear weapons, the exact opposite has been observed: de-escalation has often been a matter of chance, thanks to the enlightened insubordination of an intermediary agent. Conversely, it has now been proven that a president as emblematic as Kennedy made a deliberate decision to escalate, against the advice of his own advisers, who did not believe that the Cuban missiles would fundamentally alter the strategic balance. The bomb did not eradicate the urge to play with fire.

Benoît Pelopidas offers a scathing account of the official narrative, and makes clear his aim: to facilitate a political debate on nuclear weapons. In so doing, he endeavors to amplify the many voices raised from within the system. The rapporteurs of the French Senate's Foreign Affairs, Defense and Armed Forces Committee wrote in July 2012:

If we had to draw up a format for our armed forces today, starting from scratch, it is highly probable that the need to acquire a nuclear strike force, with two components to boot, would not be part of our defense ambitions. [...] If there is a consensus in our country around nuclear forces, it must be based on solid arguments, not on a catechism that is merely repeated (p. 266).

It is difficult to get out of the rut. But breaking away from the official catechism is indeed Benoît Pelopidas' ambition, as he criticizes "the authority without responsibility of the prophets of the impossible", i.e. the nuclear phase-out (p. 247). He also denounces the official expertise that is focused on justifying the possession of nuclear weapons, with no concern for verifying the veracity of the claims being made.

## Science and politics

In *Politics as a Vocation*, Max Weber drew a basic distinction between two behavioral and ethical attitudes. Benoît Pelopidas rearranges these two positions, demonstrating their complementarity. It is because independent research is capable of critically analyzing the deterministic official discourse ("the nuclear bomb is inevitable") that the essence of politics is restored: choice.

In this respect, Benoît Pelopidas asserts his position as a researcher, not as a substitute for political choice, even if his frustration with the pro-nuclear agenda clearly pushes him towards a purely adversarial approach. However, his work acts as a counterweight, restoring the possibility of political choice.

A critical science cannot be a substitute for politics, but rather enables it by restoring the indeterminacy of the future. Moreover, an indeterminate and unpredictable future requires us to base our decisions on moral values rather than on logical reasoning that has become inoperative due to a lack of knowledge about the future. In this way, the dilemma between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility is resolved in favor of the former: when it is impossible to calculate the consequences of different choices, all that remains is the ethical compass.

But do politicians (and individuals in general) really want to be involved in policymaking and helping society make informed choices? Do they not simply prefer experts who offer them determinism ("There is no alternative") and free them from the moral weight of decision-making by removing any measure of freedom: gone is the dilemma between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility, only fatalism

and the guilt-free enjoyment of the benefits of power remain. This is Benoît Pelopidas' main weakness (or strength): he has a high opinion of his contemporaries. I am not sure that Erasmus, author of *In Praise of Folly*, would have agreed with him. That, however, is a whole other book.

My only real criticism is that the first part of the book would have benefited from more careful editing, to make the language and reasoning flow more smoothly and avoid redundancy. This comment should not deter readers, however—quite the opposite, in fact: I would invite them to look beyond these issues and follow the book through to the end. The author's reflections on the relationship between experts and policy in the second part of the book are of great general interest; they go far beyond this subject and deserve to be applied to the role of research in general. Any research whose sole function is to validate the official discourse would be useless. Like salt that has lost its flavor, it would be better discarded and trampled underfoot.

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