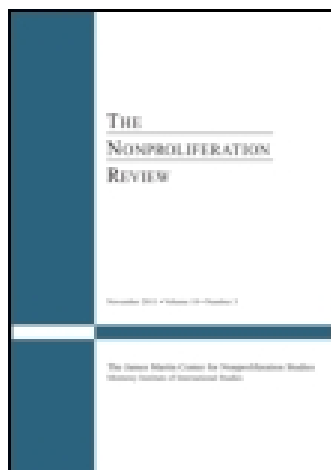


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BOOK REVIEWS

GREAT POWER RESPONSIBILITY AND NUCLEAR ORDER

Tanya Ogilvie-White © 2013

A Perpetual Menace: Nuclear Weapons and International Order, by William Walker. Routledge, 2012. 247 pages, \$42.95.

KEYWORDS: Nuclear weapons; deterrence; United States; arms control; disarmament

William Walker's book on nuclear weapons and international order is one of the most important additions to the nuclear literature of the past decade. Its main scholarly contributions, which are likely to ensure that it becomes a core academic text, lie in its novel conceptual framework and breadth of analysis, which help define the nuclear order and chart state-led efforts to shape it from the early 1940s to the present day. By anyone's standards, this is an ambitious undertaking, requiring intellectual sophistication and an almost encyclopedic knowledge of nuclear developments over a period of more than seventy years. But Walker is equipped for the task: he is drawing on a lifetime of scholarship on nuclear issues, bringing historical depth, clarity, and substance to his analysis.

Although a work of academic rigor, *A Perpetual Menace* is not a dry text. Rather, from the choice of title and cover design (which depicts the ship of fools) to the last page, it is written from the heart.¹ Having spent his career researching every angle of the nuclear debate, including the complex arguments around deterrence and strategic stability, Walker has concluded that nuclear weapons "offend against our humanity" and eliminating them should be our priority. This deep conviction and the author's desire to convey it through careful, reasoned analysis bring the book to life, making it one of those rare scholarly treasures that weave together deep knowledge with a strong sense of moral purpose. It is primarily for this reason that, despite its demanding conceptual component, this book should be on everyone's reading list, but especially those at the sharp end of nuclear policy making.

Beyond the general theme of nuclear dangers, the message that comes through loudest and clearest in *The Perpetual Menace* is that the great powers are ultimately responsible for the successes and failures of the nuclear order. Many challenges exist—from the destabilizing nuclear arms racing dynamics in the Middle East and Asia to the murky underworld of illicit nuclear trade—but the nuclear weapon states (NWS) have the greatest power to shape our nuclear future.² Although the nuclear defiance of Iran and North Korea often dominates the headlines and preoccupies scholars and practitioners

alike, the key point in Walker's analysis is that these developments should not distract us from the fact that the great powers hold primary responsibility for international peace and stability. The most powerful states have a moral as well as a legal and political obligation to engage in nuclear restraint, to bear a greater burden of the costs of building effective international governance institutions, and to generate momentum towards nuclear elimination. Until this happens, nuclear weapons will be a perpetual menace. Walker is at his most compelling when addressing this theme, especially in his critique of US nuclear policies during the Cold War and since, but also toward the end of the book, when he begins to question whether, as China and India become more powerful, they, too, will be willing to share a greater burden of this responsibility.

While the urgency of Walker's central message is the most engaging element of his book, the most original contribution to the literature lies in the book's unique conceptual framework, which allows him to take a broad, sweeping overview of the nuclear order, setting his book apart from more narrowly focused contributions.³ He depicts the nuclear order as comprised of two "interconnected systems of social endeavor," linked to varying degrees through space and time by what he refers to as "connecting tissue." At its most basic level, the first system is referred to as "deterrence plus" and is composed of the NWS, with interactions built around nuclear deterrence and the goal of war avoidance. The second system, which is termed "non-proliferation plus," consists of the non-nuclear weapon states and their military abstinence from and civil engagement with nuclear technology. The goal of this second system is to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by additional states while allowing civil nuclear technological activity. Crossing over these two systems are the alliances of the NWS, plus NWS activities in the nonproliferation regime and civil nuclear trade. A framework of norms, international institutions, and reciprocal obligations comprise the connecting tissue linking these two systems.

This is a reasonably clear and simple schema for depicting the actual nuclear order, which Walker admits is of "baffling complexity." It illuminates the linkages between stated nuclear technology development, diplomacy, strategy, and trade, shows how they are all integral parts of the nuclear order, and explains how and why developments in one system of nuclear management will have knock-on effects in the other. This is the book's most important contribution. In contrast, most contributions to the literature explore the dynamics in just one of the systems, or unravel the connecting tissue that binds them, resulting in important but more limited understandings of how the nuclear order operates as a whole.

This is especially relevant to debates among nuclear strategists as well as advocates of nuclear disarmament, as both often overlook key linkages, leading to destabilizing policy choices and unrealistic proposals. Walker provides numerous dramatic examples of when this has happened in the past, sparking international crises and putting the fragile nuclear order at risk. He reserves his most damning criticism for the George W. Bush administration's aggressive policy of preemption in the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, arguing that it demonstrated a total disregard for the connecting tissue of the nuclear order and risked pulling it apart. Less dramatic but almost as significant are the ongoing policies of nuclear exceptionalism by the NWS toward Israel, India, and Pakistan, which

have undermined non-nuclear norms and raised valid accusations of double standards, making it more difficult to deal effectively with cases of noncompliance.

At times, these low points in the recent history of the nuclear order make for depressing reading; partly for this reason, the first half of the book, which mainly deals with Cold War nuclear history, is more enjoyable. It is peppered with just as many examples of unwise policy choices, but the fact that it is past history (although still relevant) makes it more digestible, as well as analytically and historically richer. Walker writes with more flair and confidence in this part of the book, demonstrating an extraordinary grasp of the Cold War nuclear literature and a nuanced understanding of the history of the period. A high point in his historical analysis is his treatment of two crises of nuclear order from 1973–86, which shook a young Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The first crisis was triggered by the rapid expansion of nuclear enrichment capabilities beyond the United States, and a desperate bid by Washington to limit its proliferation consequences through the creation of a new export control regime. These developments sparked serious rifts in the Western alliance, among NPT member states, and between North and South, leading to sensitivities among developing states over the issue of technology denial that continue to this day. Perhaps most significantly, they provoked a search, especially by Pakistan, to evade the new regulatory controls, and to the birth of the A.Q. Khan network that was uncovered more than 20 years later. The second crisis involved a return to what Walker calls the “visceral enmity and military confrontation” between the United States and the Soviet Union during the early 1980s, when Soviet paranoia and US desire for strategic invulnerability brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. At the heart of both of these crises lay nuclear technology, and a failure by policy makers to grasp the linkages between the two systems and connecting tissue that comprise the nuclear order.

It is not easy to find faults with this book. Some readers may find its US-centrism frustrating, especially given that the conceptual framework lends itself to a much more extensive and inclusive analysis than Walker provides. But Washington’s prominent role in the history and ongoing development of nuclear technology justifies this US focus. Moreover, the policies pursued by various US administrations have also provoked some of the most serious nuclear crises. Also, flawed and criticized as US nuclear policies have been over the years (and Walker’s critique of them is no exception), this book reminds us that the United States has provided more leadership and shouldered a greater burden of responsibility for shaping the international nuclear order than any other state, sometimes showing great vision and at times taking great risks. If anything, even more of the nuances could have been teased out from the United States’s sometimes conflicting role in this regard, especially in Walker’s analysis of the Bush administration’s controversial counter-proliferation strategy. Walker roundly condemns this period of US leadership as uniquely destructive to the nuclear order, and in this he fails to take into account its positive aspects. For example, although the Iraq invasion was an episode of extraordinary political and strategic bungling as well as a moral outrage, the Bush administration did provide the inspiration and political momentum behind a number of initiatives that have bolstered the nuclear order, including the Proliferation Security Initiative and UN Security Council

Resolution 1540. Walker mentions this in passing, but this interesting duality deserved more attention.

More generally, Walker's essentially state-centric approach may draw criticism from those who argue that the nuclear order has fundamentally changed since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, requiring more emphasis to be placed on the role of non-state actors in the development of conceptual frameworks and policy. The book's state-centrism may also fail to satisfy scholars and activists who focus on the role that civil society and international organizations have played in generating the norms that have generated much of the connecting tissue. Not to deny the importance of these non-state dynamics, Walker emphasizes the point that states, and especially the great powers, have played the most significant role in shaping the nuclear order, and this is unlikely to change radically in the foreseeable future. He deals with the nexus between state and non-state nuclear activities by introducing the slightly awkward concepts of "regular and irregular social interaction": the regular domain of licit interactions among accredited actors (state and non-state), and the irregular domain of illicit activities among licit and illicit actors (again, state and non-state). Walker argues that these two domains can be traced back almost to the origins of the nuclear order, but he also accepts that the irregular domain is posing greater challenges than it has in the past. Interestingly, he cautions against exaggerating these developments, believing that doing so could lead to misplaced dissatisfaction with important elements of the nuclear order and misguided efforts to change or circumvent them.⁴

A Perpetual Menace leaves the reader acutely aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the nuclear order, and the potential for increased vulnerability. Like a number of other recent studies, it also highlights the immense barriers to eliminating nuclear weapons, which, despite reinvigorated great power interest in disarmament, remains a very distant prospect.⁵ The title of the final chapter, "Heading for the Rocks?," encapsulates Walker's concerns. As the relative power of Washington declines, he wonders what an Asia-dominated world will look like and what needs to be done to encourage Asia's rising powers to take a greater share of responsibility for the nuclear order. He does not offer us any comforting answers to these questions, but instead ends on an uneasy note, contrasting the Eurocentric system of military engagement that has dominated the age of US preeminence, with the Asiatic systems of military engagement that are likely to replace it. While the Euro system is now characterized by established connecting tissue, the connecting tissue of the Asian system is weakly defined. Having exposed this problem and its potential impact on disarmament dynamics, the book unfortunately leaves us without any concrete proposals for change. Rather, it presents the issue of Asian great power responsibility and nuclear order as an open question, and concludes that serious progress in disarmament is unlikely to occur unless the world is shocked by tragedy into taking action.⁶ It is a bleak conclusion, and a frustrating one, but perhaps fitting given the book's title and its references to the ship of fools. This final passage, taken from the penultimate page of the book, sums up Walker's feelings of trepidation:

It is remarkable, as Schelling observed, that nuclear weapons have not been exploded in anger since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Equally remarkable is the range of institutions developed to constrain the development, possession and use of nuclear weapons, and

the extent of support that they have attracted, despite their acknowledged shortcomings and injustices. They have not, however, diminished the fragility of control and everyone's consequent vulnerability to crisis and tragedy.

This is why states and people cannot be resigned to the permanent, active presence in the world of nuclear weapons and weapon programmes. Whatever value is attached to nuclear deterrence, this prospect offends against our humanity and reason and asks too much trust . . . in admirals' and pilots' abilities to keep the ship of fools afloat, on an even keel and guided between the rocks. Eliminating the weapons has to have priority.

NOTES

1. The book's title, *A Perpetual Menace*, is taken from a memorandum sent by Niels Bohr, a founding father of nuclear physics, to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in July 1944, one year before the United States dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the memo, Bohr warned that "any temporary advantage [gained from the possession of the atomic bomb], however great, may be outweighed by a perpetual menace to human security." Walker explains that the book's cover design is based on the medieval allegory of the ship of fools, in which society is depicted as a ship carrying idiots and reprobates unaware of their plight and pilotless on a choppy sea. He points out that the allegory is stretched because the ship he is referring to "carries the innocent and capable along with the deranged, and, far from being allowed to drift aimlessly, is being piloted in acute awareness of mortal danger."
2. The book examines the most serious challenges to the nuclear order, with the exception of the consequences of the current expansion of nuclear energy (often referred to in the literature as the "nuclear renaissance"). Toward the end of the book, Walker explains that he originally intended to include a discussion on this topic too, but he ran out of time.
3. This conceptualization of the nuclear order will provide useful insights beyond those elucidated in *A Perpetual Menace*. It could be a useful framework for future research (more on this in note four, below), and could offer interesting perspectives if read in conjunction with important, more narrowly focused works, such as William Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, *Nuclear Politics and the Non-Aligned Movement: Principles versus Pragmatism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); Michael Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons: Principles, Problems, Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Maria Rost Rublee, *Nonproliferation Norms: Why States Choose Nuclear Restraint* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); and Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
4. *A Perpetual Menace* rarely offers strong critiques of the work of other authors. One exception is the discussion at the beginning of chapter six, which is titled: "Into a Second Nuclear Age? Shifting and Expanding Problems of Nuclear Order, 1997–2007." Here, Walker highlights Michael Krepon's *Better Safe than Sorry: The Ironies of Living with the Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) when he cautions against overplaying the concept of a "second nuclear age." Walker's objection is based, as he explains later in the chapter, on threat inflation, which contains within it "an intrinsic drive to a disproportionate response."
5. Remarks by President Barack Obama, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009; United States Mission to the United Nations; "Fact Sheet on the United Nations Security Council Summit on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Disarmament: UNSC Resolution 1887," September 24, 2009, <<http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/september/129564.htm>>; Catherine McArdle Kelleher and Judith Reppy, *Getting to Zero: The Path to Nuclear Disarmament* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Tanya Ogilvie-White and David Santoro, *Slaying the Nuclear Dragon: Disarmament Dynamics in the Twenty-first Century* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2012); George Perkovich and James Acton, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, Adelphi Paper 396 (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2008).
6. It is time for a wide-ranging study that addresses the question of an Asian nuclear order from different international perspectives (akin to Perkovich and Acton, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*).