“Divergent Perspectives: A Comparative Review of ‘The Nuclear Club’ and ‘Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace’”

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The two recent books published by the Stanford University Press (The Nuclear Club and Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace), although related to arms control, bring out analytical and historical analysis of nuclear diplomacy from different perspectives. One emphasizes the formation of nuclear club and its implications over war and peace in the third world countries, while the other focuses on the establishment of arms control regimes and stability related to it in general. The domain expertise of both the authors is amply reflected in the intellectual depth and articulate views that they have presented through these books. Michael Krepon, also the co-founder of Stimson Center, has been one of the foremost voices on arms control and non-proliferation. With both academic and administrative experience, he has described the intricate details of past and present arms control measures during successive US Administrations. In this review essay, I first review Jonathan Hunt’s The Nuclear Club to present a lens through which Michael Krepon’s work Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace is analyzed.

Some like Realists espouse the notion of “might is right” in the realm of international politics. This has been exemplified and elaborated by
Jonathan Hunt through the book *The Nuclear Club*. The book provides elaborate and anecdotal details, extracted and analyzed through extensive archival research, to explain that the global nuclear order christened by clubbing the nuclear weapons wielding states together, did not lead to a peaceful world. It essentially averted nuclear conflicts in the industrial world while legitimizing foreign intervention, preventive wars and sanctions by western powers led by the United States in the name of international peace and humanity or law enforcement. Challenging the dominant narrative of a “Long Peace” (lack of large-scale conflict since 1945), the author has tried to narrow down reader’s attention on the co-relation between nuclear deterrence driven stability and the frequency of civil wars, proxy conflicts, and territorial disputes among non-nuclear weapons states.

Despite the James Franck Committee report on social and political implications of Atomic Bomb (that never reached policymakers), nuclear scientists like Neil Bohr, Leo Szilard, and J. Robert Oppenheimer attempted their bit to caution the US government of an impending nuclear arms race due to their impossibility of sustaining a monopoly on nuclear data or raw uranium/thorium. The mindset in Washington, riven by superpower rivalry, denied the cautious tales of their own nuclear experts. A silent revolution against nuclear aftereffects was underway, led primarily by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Even the US Administration of Henry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower had to maintain humanitarian narratives in their foreign policy (US Atomic Energy Commission (1946), Open Skies proposal (1955), Atoms for Peace (1953) etc.) in order to avert the risk of nuclear war.

A nuanced articulation of the Atoms for Peace proposal reveals that President Eisenhower wanted to shoot multiple apples with single blockbuster package. Through the idea of an atomic pool encapsulated within the system of international control proposed through Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace speech, it was expected to pacify public opinion, legitimize US nuclear technology, divert precious Soviet materials and above all make the hydrogen bomb a common lexicon. It further internationalized the secrecy regime that sealed nuclear weapons production data under strict restriction while disseminating nuclear data facilitating commercial and foreign assistance. Ultimately, the dissemination of nuclear civilian technology proved a harbinger of conflicts and instability in the third world including the Middle East in
1950s (Israel’s nuclear acquisition amid war) and South Asia during 1970s and onwards (the India-Pakistan-China nuclear triangle (1998)).

Jonathan Hunt has encapsulated the international developments from Irish resolution to the eventual formulation of oligopoly-like-structure under Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, with simultaneous emergence of sovereign states in the third world triggered by decolonization. As Ireland’s Foreign Minister Frank Aiken was setting the “political foundation of peace” through Irish resolution in the United Nations, NATO report MC 48/2 formalized forward deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Western Europe, alongside intermediate range ballistic missiles under Supreme Allied Commander Europe control. At the UN however, Aiken made innumerable attempts to foster a new alliance of non-dissemination proponents from Africa to Asia to the similar voices coming from the Cold War rival blocs such as George Kennan.

The author has emphasized the perils that “nuclear club” formation has ushered in on the newly established sovereign states. On one hand, the superpowers resolved to maintain their supremacy by advancing their influence and rivalry far across the continents, on the other hand former European empires started consolidating their resources to be invested in nuclear enterprises, thereby leaving decades of social fissures, ethnic conflicts, regional disputes, dysfunctional politics, underdevelopment, and uncharted borders as it was in their former colonies. Further, the Kennedy Administration’s attempt to formalize the nuclear containment policy vis-à-vis Soviet Union and to gain nuclear armed leadership amid the decolonization spree instead of pushing for nuclear free world, lent further credence to such line of thought.

As intriguing as it is, the author points out that as the US policymakers debated the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in Geneva, a simultaneous military escalation in Vietnam ensued. Illustrating the examples of India, Pakistan, Israel, Egypt, among others, the author maintained that in a blind bid to achieve nuclear arms control and a non-dissemination treaty, the western powers had to dispatch high end military hardware to third world countries, further exacerbating the regional security dilemma. The case of multilateral forces (MLF) and NATO nuclear sharing arrangement can also be observed on similar lines.
Further, the author details the negotiations, deliberations and persuasion that finally led to the enforcement of the treaty in March 1970. He has drawn a particular attention on the significance of the treaty for the United States. The question holds merit because as the negotiations in Geneva continued, Soviet Union sent Warsaw Pact forces in Czechoslovakia (1968), threatened Communist China with nuclear strike (1969) and continued US bombardment of Vietnam and Cambodia. The point brought out through this extremely detailed and richly articulated book is, as succinctly summarized by Henry when he responded to President Nixon, “The State Department bureaucracy considers that to be theirs...The Nonproliferation Treaty has nothing to do with the security of the United States of America. You know very well. It’s made at the expense of other countries” (p. 242).

Michael Krepon has historically/chronologically detailed the diplomatic history of emergence of various arms control measures and their implications for international politics. In the process he addressed certain pertinent questions- How has it come to pass that nuclear weapons haven’t been used in warfare for three-quarters of a century? How have they been stigmatized to such an extent that states do not even test them the way they regularly test other instruments? How has the norm of nuclear non-proliferation taken root?

Krepon has chronicled the dangerous decades of deterrence in the initial post-war years where more and more destructive weapons were innovated while there emerged no consensus over arms control measures. Bringing out the complex interplay between two important concepts, deterrence and escalation, Krepon stipulates that nuclear deterrence alone cannot be attributed for “long peace” rather it has to be clubbed with diplomacy (for reassurances regarding non-use intention). Krepon began his book by quoting the very contention that Jonathan Hunt refuted in his book. Krepon began by acknowledging the fact that “nuclear weapons have not been used in warfare since 1945.” Krepon’s attribution of this feat to the various arms control measures including nuclear non-proliferation regimes is what Hunt is skeptical of. According to Hunt, the non-proliferation and arms control regimes have merely averted the conflicts in western industrial states of Europe and North America, shifting it to the third world countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In the process, they have completely disregarded peace and stability in third world countries.
As against the anxieties generated by mutually assured destruction (MAD), Eisenhower realized the importance of mutual survival through the norm of non-use of nuclear weapons in warfare. Describing the palatable nuclear arms race and the resultant exponential growth in nuclear weapons stockpile, Krepon states that “deterrence generated these numbers; arms control is needed to survive them” (p. 8). Henceforth, the author tries to draw a contradiction between nuclear deterrence leading to the danger of escalation on one hand, and nuclear diplomacy and arms control leading to assurances of non-use and stability. Arms control measures are more stability oriented in the sense that it creates mutually adherent and acceptable norms leading to a sense of predictability amid geopolitical uncertainties. A protracted nuclear peace must embrace both deterrence and arms control. As a suggestion, Krepon puts emphasis upon the extension of access to the formal platforms for arms control and nuclear diplomacy to other nuclear weapon wielding states such as India, Pakistan, Britain, and China. The significance of nuclear norms must be diffused among all the nuclear weapon wielding states irrespective of their arsenal size.

As against Hunt’s approach in the book The Nuclear Club which is argument driven for a particular historical phase (1945-1975), Krepon makes a general case to demonstrate the significance of arms control as a means to assure the opponent for non-use of nuclear weapons. Further, arguing about the absence of arms control diplomacy, he poses several questions such as, what forms of reassurance can now be taken when the treaties are absent? How can we extend the nuclear peace in a world of growing competition between rivals that possess nuclear weapons and deep partisan division in the United States?

Krepon further gives broad policy prescriptions in the form of the extension of key norms that have evolved and been sustained throughout the Cold War and beyond. Foremost among them all is the norm of “no-use” of nuclear weapons in warfare. Hailing the observance of non-use norms so far, Krepon cautions that nuclear doctrines embedding postures like “no first use” would not be helpful in future crisis. Rather, they will depend on the disposition of usable weapons and forces near the crisis, the stakes in dispute, and the risk-taking disposition of national leaders (p. 506). The other two norms are the norm of “non-testing” of nuclear weapons, non-proliferation. The Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty has not been in force but has served the purpose so far. None of the nuclear weapon wielding states, except North Korea, has conducted nuclear explosion since 1999.
The author has followed a normative approach by counting on the possibility of the revival of nuclear arms control, based on the nuclear anxiety which is dangerously unsettling in its absence. By outrightly criticizing the concept of nuclear deterrence, Krepon’s emphasis is on the imperfection of MAD. He denounces the peace, which has been preserved through the fear of mass slaughter, as immoral. Michael Krepon has produced this book in a most readable form useful for students, teachers as well as insightful for practitioners. Grounded on the necessity of popular pressure coming from the common populace, the author has used simple and non-jargon to ensure a public debate to repair and revive the practice of arms control. Calling himself a pragmatist (for not dwelling extensively on nuclear abolition) as well as an idealist (for aspiring to achieve at least a century of non-use of nuclear weapons), Krepon suggests the convening of a forum for all nuclear weapons wielding states to deliberate nuclear restraint as well as of strict enforcement and observance of non-use norm. With the new pair of nuclear rivals gaining the center stage in international nuclear order like the US and China, previous arms control and non-proliferation measures are important to be revive and revise to suit current security environment. Most of all, the most imperative option would be to reinforce the already established norms of non-use and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The works of both Jonathan Hunt and Michael Krepon have added an excellent reference point for nuclear scholars and experts to look at the nuclear non-proliferation regimes from a separate but unique perspective. On the one hand The Nuclear Club emphasis the correlation between the formalization of non-proliferation regimes and its implications over stability in the non-west or third world countries. On the other hand, Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace tries to draw attention of the readers on the importance of these non-proliferation regimes in attaining “nuclear peace.” Contextualizing the nuclear dynamics during Truman and Eisenhower Administration, Krepon brought forth the deep mistrust, lack of mutual awareness and mad nuclear arsenal buildup in 1950s. The perspective from which Hunt observed these two US Administrations is how they built consensus among themselves to avert nuclear conflagration on their territories while shifting the danger to third countries, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Another point of distinction between the two books lies in their chronological scope and timeline. While Hunt’s extensive archival research explored in detail the successive US Administration’s (1945-
1975) approach toward the formation of nuclear club, Krepon’s timeline extends to the Trump Administration, investigating the approach of all the previous US governments toward arms control and nuclear diplomacy. He has detailed what went on behind the scenes while negotiating various attempts made for arms control from Surprise Attack Conference of 1958 (which led to monitoring mechanism called “Geneva System”) to Limited Test Ban Treaty and eventually to NPT among others.

The works of both Jonathan Hunt and Michael Krepon promise to be must reads for students of international politics, nuclear scholars and experts, practitioners, and policymakers and politicians alike. The ultimate objective of both books appears to be to gain a nuanced understanding of arms control measures and to realize their potential benefits and significance in terms of achieving international peace and stability.