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“Activism and the Prevention of Nuclear War: Some Possible Indirect Connections”

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I would like to thank Matt and Neta for organizing this workshop and inviting me to participate. The workshop is an opportunity for me to revisit some work I did in the earliest part of my academic career, and to consider how this work might connect to some other lines of research I initiated at later points in my career. In the first part of my academic career, I examined the impact of protest movements on nuclear arms control, focusing primarily on how such protests affected U.S. policy. With the exception of one substantial encyclopedia article¹ that explored the role of NGOs in arms control more broadly, I have not worked on the topic of anti-nuclear activism for about 20 years now.

In this early work, I was primarily interested in whether protest exerts a fairly direct impact on government policies. But activism of the type that Randy Forsberg helped organize and inspire might also have more indirect effects. Her dissertation, with its focus on how attitudes and norms regarding war might evolve, seemed to consider such possibilities. In my remarks, I would like to consider some possible avenues of indirect influence as they apply to nuclear weapons and the prevention of nuclear war.

Specifically, I would like to consider possible connections between civil society activities and two topics I have addressed subsequent to my work on peace movements. In 2012, I published an article on the concept of nuclear learning.² And in the last few years I have written two as yet unpublished conference papers outlining my ideas about global nuclear governance arrangements.³ My work on nuclear learning and nuclear governance does not mention activism, but I suspect it could play a meaningful role in these areas, and I will use this paper to outline some initial thoughts about how this might occur. First, I will briefly summarize my work on each topic separately, then explore the possible connections across them.

Activism and Arms Control

Like many participants in this workshop, in the late 1970s to mid-1980s, I participated in the protests against the nuclear arms race that came to be known as the nuclear freeze movement. This included student organizing as a college undergraduate and then, after graduation, an internship at an NGO in Washington, D.C., helping organize opposition to the MX missile. When I began graduate school, I was curious about whether such activism had made any difference, so in my Ph.D. dissertation I attempted to determine the impact of protest on U.S. nuclear arms control policy.⁴ The dissertation contained detailed case studies of protests in the

1950s and early 1960s against nuclear testing, and of the nuclear freeze movement and its aftermath in the 1980s. After some delay due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, I published an expanded version with a slightly altered focus as a book in 1998.⁵ The book added a statistical test and a case study of protests in the late 1960s against ABMs. I also published the case study of the nuclear freeze as a chapter in an edited volume,⁶ and the statistical test as a separate journal article.⁷ In addition, I also published a separate but related article that looked at European protests and their role in helping bring about the INF Treaty.⁸

My research concluded that protest movements could have a significant impact at the agenda-setting stage. This can be true in two senses. First, popular protest can put arms control in general on the agenda. This essentially takes the form of a demand that the government “do something” to reduce the danger of nuclear war. This was the main effect of the nuclear freeze movement. The freeze never got its specific policy proposal – a bilateral agreement to freeze the arms race – adopted as policy. But it did force the Reagan administration to alter its own approach. Under President Reagan, the U.S. government sought to delay entering into new arms talks with the Soviet Union until it could complete a massive round of nuclear weapons modernization. But under pressure from the freeze, the Reagan administration agreed to sit down with the Soviets earlier than it had intended to, and it accelerated its internal policy process to develop its own preferred arms control proposals.

Second, protest can sometimes also set the agenda more specifically to elevate a particular proposal. This was the main impact of protest against nuclear testing and the radioactive fallout it produced. In contrast to Reagan’s preferences when he took office, President Eisenhower was open to exploring arms control, but had his own preferred ideas such as his “Atoms for Peace” proposal. He was not instinctively attracted to the idea of halting nuclear testing, but the combined impact of U.S. and international protest led his administration to realize that arms talks would have to give top priority to exploring options to end nuclear testing.

Although activism can have a significant impact on the agenda, I found that once negotiations begin in earnest, protest movements exert little influence over the details of what is being negotiated. The content of possible arms control deals, at least in the Cold War U.S.-Soviet context, seemed to follow its own dynamic that was fairly insulated from outside pressure. If an arms control deal was successfully reached, however, civil society groups could again play a role at the ratification stage. If they supported the treaty that was negotiated, they could work with a like-minded president to help secure Senate ratification.

There are several mechanisms by which civil society activities might translate into influence on policy. The classic outsider approach, which relies on mobilizing public opinion to apply pressure on the political system, is one option. Civil society groups can also play a more inside game, instead of or alongside the outsider game. The insider route relies on building coalitions

with members of Congress or providing tacit support to bureaucratic officials that helps them in internal debates. In the Cold War period, groups at times also formed transnational relationships with key figures in the Soviet Union; Matt Evangelista authored the definitive account of these efforts.⁹

Influence can arise because of political pressures, but it has other potential sources as well. Groups can generate good information, analysis, or ideas that prove persuasive with key officials. Randy Forsberg's Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies (IDDS) sought to combine these two avenues of influence, using information and analysis to inform officials, while also crafting policy proposals that could mobilize public support. A third pathway for influence relies more on invoking normative arguments to bring about change. The campaigns to ban landmines and cluster munitions primarily took this route, and the idea of normative change also figures prominently in Randy Forsberg's thinking about how to end war.

In this paper, I wish to explore another possibility. Another pathway to influence may be more cognitive in nature. Rather than changing norms, or in addition to this, activism may also help shape understandings and change how people think. More accurately, this process might involve a mixture of cognitive, affective, and normative factors, but in my discussion I will put the cognitive component uppermost. This idea is inspired by my work on nuclear learning, to which I now turn.

Nuclear Learning

In the early 2000s, I published an article on the nature of learning in international relations.¹⁰ In it, I highlighted the importance of learning that is shared across countries. When key elites in different countries share lessons (or more accurately, share certain lessons), I argued, this makes progress toward cooperation and peace more likely. Based on this work, I was invited to write the concept paper for a conference on nuclear learning by India and Pakistan in the decade following their 1998 nuclear tests.

The most important prior work on nuclear learning was by Joseph Nye, who identified several shared ideas about nuclear weapons as the basis for the development of a U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms control regime.¹¹ In building on Nye's work, I related nuclear learning to the proliferation optimism-pessimism debate, also known as the Waltz-Sagan debate.¹² The optimist position, developed by Kenneth Waltz, asserts that gradual nuclear proliferation might actually prove to be a good thing. It argues that the destructive power of nuclear weapons is so obvious that nuclear arms will inherently tend to induce caution in the leaders of nuclear-armed states. In this way, nuclear weapons prove to be a stabilizing force in world politics, making major war of any kind virtually impossible. The pessimist side, represented by Scott Sagan among others, disputes this view.

While I share the pessimist view about the dangers of nuclear proliferation, I used my paper on nuclear learning to cut into this debate from a different angle. I challenged the optimist assumption that the stabilizing effects of nuclear weapons are inherent in the technology. People, including world leaders, are not born with the knowledge of how destructive nuclear weapons could be. They are not born with the belief that such destruction must be avoided, or the view that certain actions might make such destruction more likely and are therefore too risky to undertake. This knowledge and the associated policy implications have to be learned.

I divide nuclear learning into two categories: factual and inferential. Factual learning involves gaining knowledge about the physical effects of nuclear weapons use. It is the part of learning that deals with the destructive capabilities of the weapons. Inferential learning then refers to the implications that one draws from these physical facts for appropriate policies and strategies. It is possible for different individuals to draw different inferences, so there is room for different types of inferential learning. Some people draw the conclusion that the weapons are simply too dangerous and must be abolished; others focus on the need for doctrines and force postures designed to maximize stability by avoiding creating incentives for first use; still others see advantages in nuclear superiority or war-fighting capabilities. For the stabilizing effects predicted by Waltz to be possible, I argued, it is important for leaders among all relevant states to draw similar inferences and share a kind of learning that leads them to prioritize strategic stability. Even this cannot guarantee nuclear peace – accidents and miscalculations are still possible – but if countries do not share certain kinds of inferential learning the stability predicted by proliferation optimists is less likely to materialize.

Global Nuclear Governance

More recently, I have extended this work to begin thinking about whether a global nuclear order exists. In two conference papers, I have suggested that there is a global nuclear governance architecture, but one that is starting to erode thanks to the rhetoric and actions of leaders like Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, and Donald Trump.

I draw on regime theory in international relations to sketch out my view of the global nuclear order. I suggest it mostly developed organically, is largely not formalized in any document, and may not enjoy complete recognition or buy-in from world leaders. The underlying goal of the nuclear order is to keep nuclear weapons from being detonated near people – that is, to prevent nuclear war, accidental or unauthorized use, and nuclear terrorism. This goal is subject to the constraint that some countries will continue to possess nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future for the security benefits they are seen to confer, and perhaps also for reasons of prestige. The nuclear order is an attempt to continue to live with nuclear weapons without them going off.

The nuclear order, as I see it, has three main pillars: strategic stability, the nuclear taboo, and the nonproliferation regime (lately expanded to include significant nuclear security measures).

Strategic stability involves the goal of removing first-strike incentives that could create instability in a crisis. It is pursued through moderation in force postures and doctrines, negotiated arms control agreements, and confidence-building measures such as hotlines. The nuclear taboo is the most explicitly normative part of the order. It creates a sense of prohibition against any first use of nuclear weapons; it reserves as the only legitimate use of nuclear weapons the threat to retaliate with them as a deterrent against truly catastrophic threats. Finally, the nonproliferation regime consists of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and other arrangements intended to limit (and ideally halt) the spread of nuclear weapons to additional states. Since 9/11, the nonproliferation regime has been complemented by a host of nuclear security measures intended to keep nuclear weapons and the materials to make them out of the hands of non-state – i.e., terrorist – actors. In essence, the nuclear order seeks to keep deterrence stable, add to the inhibitions against using nuclear weapons, and limit as much as possible the number of actors who have the bomb.

It is an obvious question to ask whether this nuclear order can hold indefinitely, or whether the only safe path is to seek nuclear abolition. It is my personal belief that the world needs to find an effective path to achieve nuclear disarmament. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere, ongoing failure to make progress toward achieving global zero could even undermine the foundations of the existing nuclear order.¹³ But this is a topic for another day. In the remainder of this paper, I wish to take the ideas outlined above about nuclear learning and the global nuclear order and connect them back to citizen activism.

Indirect Impacts of Popular Protest

My papers about nuclear learning and global nuclear governance did not cite or explicitly seek to connect to my earlier work on anti-nuclear weapons protest. Let me speculate about some possible connections here. Any influence, if it exists, is likely to be indirect in nature. It will primarily operate through a cognitive pathway.

Nuclear learning is, by definition, mainly a cognitive process – though it might also have affective, emotional, or normative components. Learning involves taking in factual information about the effects of nuclear detonations and drawing inferences from this about the best possible policies, strategies, and force postures. As long as nuclear weapons exist and nuclear abolition appears out of reach for the moment, then inferences that support the global nuclear order as I have outlined it are the mostly likely to be conducive to stability and minimizing the chances of nuclear weapons use. If I am right, our safety from nuclear destruction – to the extent we can achieve it – depends on people (in particular, key national leaders and military officials) learning and keeping in mind how destructive any nuclear use could be, and deciding that this requires them to adopt policies and strategies that contribute to strategic stability, acknowledge a nuclear taboo, and support cooperative efforts to keep nuclear weapons from being obtained by new states or terrorist groups.

How do we ensure the necessary kinds of nuclear learning take place? What might motivate it? Civil society efforts might be able to contribute here. They are neither necessary nor sufficient – nuclear learning that contributes to maintaining a nuclear order conducive to stability could take place through other mechanisms. But one can imagine popular protest and/or NGO activities making a positive contribution. By putting nuclear weapons issues higher on the agenda, protest movements can require political leaders to spend more time thinking and perhaps learning about nuclear dangers. Leaders who are concerned about their historical legacies might be motivated to think deeply and in new ways. There is some evidence, for example, that the nuclear freeze movement helped tease out a latent streak of anti-nuclear sentiment in Ronald Reagan.

Civil society groups might also themselves be the conveyers of key information. Talks sponsored by Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), for instance, helped raise awareness among many people about the consequences of nuclear war. Large-scale protests also tend to attract media coverage. News outlets might decide to accompany their coverage of protest with more factual reporting about who has nuclear weapons and how many, and what the impact of a nuclear war would be.

Finally, by putting arms control or nonproliferation onto the negotiating agenda, civil society activities can force government bureaucracies to prepare for upcoming talks. This can result in meetings, briefing papers, and all the government activities that might force leaders to spend some time learning and thinking about nuclear arms. The more that political leaders and their advisors have nuclear dangers in mind, the more likely they are to behave cautiously and in ways that help maintain stability.

In short, civil society groups that disseminate information and analysis and/or help mobilize popular activism may indirectly contribute to reducing nuclear dangers by creating new opportunities and added motivations for key political and military leaders to learn more about the risks of nuclear war and terrorism. This is a largely though not entirely cognitive mechanism of influence. So far, work on NGOs and transnational activism has not given much attention to this possibility. In my early work, I focused on the ability of protest movements to apply political pressure or to be a source of ideas and perhaps foot soldiers that could support already like-minded allies inside the government. Other work has focused on normative mechanisms. This seems to have been the main theory behind efforts to negotiate a nuclear ban treaty in the UN General Assembly. The supporters of the ban treaty recognized that no nuclear-armed state or formal ally of such a state would join the treaty, but they hoped that voting in favor of it would start a new process of strengthening norms against nuclear weapons.

Advocates of the ban treaty created momentum for these talks by first launching a humanitarian consequences initiative. This initiative led to a series of meetings to inform diplomats about the

consequences that would follow if a nuclear war ever occurred. If my speculations in this paper are correct, then the humanitarian initiative was an important development in its own right, independent of its role in helping pave the way for the ban treaty. Indeed, its contributions to reducing the chances of nuclear war might even have been more important than those of the ban treaty, at least in the short run.

In a way, we have always been aware of the importance of examining and possibly seeking to change the ways people think. This is one reason why Mikhail Gorbachev's embrace of what he called "new thinking" had such an electrifying impact. But in considering how to promote peace, including nuclear peace, we can still do more to explore this insight. Civil society activities, ranging from protest movements like the nuclear freeze to NGOs like Randy Forsberg's IDDS, may be able to exert a degree of cognitive influence by affecting both what people think about and how they think. In a world where, as in the late 1970s and early 1980s, nuclear dangers appear to once again be increasing, we should consider every possible avenue for counteracting these dangers.

¹ "NGOs, Social Movements, and Arms Control," in *Arms Control: History, Theory, and Policy*, ed. Robert E. Williams, Jr. and Paul R. Viotti (ABC-CLIO/Praeger, 2012).

² "The Concept of Nuclear Learning," *Nonproliferation Review* 19, no. 1 (March 2012): 79-93.

³ "The Status of Global Nuclear Governance," International Studies Association annual meeting, San Francisco, CA, April 4-7, 2018; "The Role of Nonproliferation in the Global Nuclear Order," paper prepared for conference on "Re-Imagining the Global Nuclear Order," University of Oxford, UK, September 21-23, 2015.

⁴ *Domestic Politics, Citizen Activism, and U.S. Nuclear Arms Control Policy*, PhD diss., Stanford University, 1991.

⁵ *Domestic Society and International Cooperation: The Impact of Protest on U.S. Arms Control Policy*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations no. 60 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁶ "The Nuclear Freeze Movement's Effect on Policy," in *Coalitions and Political Movements: The Lessons of the Nuclear Freeze*, ed. David S. Meyer and Thomas R. Rochon (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997).

⁷ "Domestic Sources of Preferences for Arms Cooperation: The Impact of Protest," *Journal of Peace Research* 35, no. 6 (November 1998): 677-695.

⁸ "Beyond Two-Level Games: Domestic-International Interaction in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Negotiations," *International Organization* 47, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 599-628.

⁹ Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ "The Importance of International Learning," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (April 2003): 187-209.

¹¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Nuclear Learning and U.S.-Soviet Security Regimes," *International Organization* 41, no. 3 (Summer, 1987): 371-402.

¹² Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate*, Third Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

¹³ "Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation: Examining the Linkage Argument," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/13): 92-132.