

9. And Now For Something Completely Different...: Psychological Dimensions of the NPT Process

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Have you ever, for a moment, thought to yourself: All this is totally absurd? If you have, it is because you have an awareness rising to the surface of the paradoxical nature of nuclear weapons.

Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton states that nuclear weapons are beyond psychology. The unprecedented power of nuclear weapons alters our relationship to life and death. It creates "staggering new problems for us and at the same time distorts our thinking and blunts our feeling about precisely these problems." It allows us to co-exist with the constant threat of annihilation while at the same time believing they somehow make us more safe.

The magnitude of the danger induces psychic numbing, denial, and fear. These, in combination with overconfidence and illusions of control, all interfere with optimal thought and action. While deliberating about nuclear weapons it is essential to be aware of our own psychology, the psychology of our enemies, and the dynamics of our interactions, lest we make psychological mistakes with irreversible unintended consequences. Nuclear weapons are not a necessary evil, they are an *unnecessary* evil.

There have been times in history when false assumptions, misperceptions, miscalculations, and exaggerated threats triggered undesired violence, or even brought us to the brink of annihilation, as in the Cuban missile crisis. There have also been times when courageous, imaginative people averted catastrophes, also in the Cuban Missile crisis. If we act consciously, aware of our own assumptions and of our enemies' assumptions we can reduce conflict and increase creative problem-solving.

The magnitude of the danger we face can understandably limit our responses in several ways.

1 - We may act impulsively, focusing on the immediacy of real or imagined threats thereby ignoring long term consequences that were not originally intended or desirable. The worst case of this is the situation of high alert, where the reaction to a perceived attack has to be so rapid and under such stress, conducive to poor judgment that could easily result in the launch of a full-scale and mistaken response.

2 - Absorbed by our own security needs, we may overlook the way that our actions provoke an opposite response. If we ignore the psychological meaning of our actions for others, we may play into their fears and fantasies. For instance: Some respond to US policies with fear, humiliation, and or by feeling inferior in some way. Some think: "If Israel and Pakistan have nukes, why can't we?" Some take US or NATO's refusal to renounce first use literally, believing that signals plans for attack. However much it is insisted that nuclear weapons are a political weapon, a high level of credibility in

deterrence has to be retained by having real plans for attack. The declared targets therefore surmise that with their own nukes, they might prevent the US from threatening them. In this way, nuclear weapons states are providing incentives for other nations to develop weapons to deter a perceived threat of attack.

3 - We may limit our responses to using threats or even violence and coercion. We may discount or ignore effective nonviolent strategies of conflict transformation, believing "the only thing they understand is force," or "we can't negotiate with those kind of people" thus generating self-fulfilling prophecies. The policy of "carrots and sticks" suggests we are dealing with a donkey, not a sovereign state with a long history and developed culture. In its very nature it contradicts itself by building trust and undermining it at the same time, making the recipient mistrustful of the negotiation.

4 -The desire for nuclear weapons is a symptom of something deeper. Focusing on getting rid of the symptom, we ignore the cause. Efforts to physically stop proliferation without addressing the underlying psychological meaning cannot succeed. The relationship between the possession of nuclear weapons and power is inextricable. Some perceive that possession of the greatest means of destruction in the world means that you will be taken seriously.

This can provoke weaker actors into military action. Today that includes nuclear terrorism, an asymmetrical response to asymmetrical power. While we must focus on the supply side of terrorism, by safeguarding fissile materials, we must simultaneously address the demand side of terrorism. Threatening, humiliating and backing one into a corner can increase paranoia and make others more dangerous, as well as increasing recruitment to terrorism and arousing popular support for nuclear weapons. The way to be secure is to make your enemy more secure.

Military superiority, national security, and nuclear deterrence are old concepts that have become new oxymorons that need to be replaced by "mutually assured survival."

After 35 years of waiting, the NPT is in crisis. Failure to disarm creates an atmosphere of bad faith, demoralization, intimidation, humiliation and resentment. But the treaty is not an end in itself. The end is elimination of the threat of Armageddon, and a replacement of war with more effective methods of tension reduction, violence prevention and conflict transformation. We need to strengthen and evolve the NPT in order to prevent a spiral ending in nuclear anarchy. We need to deliberately create conditions for enduring security so future generations can live without fear of annihilation.

Our choice is between universal security and universal insecurity.