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A Non-Nuclearist Future

Myron A. Greenberg

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

“A Non-Nuclearist Future”

Larkin, Bruce D. *Nuclear Designs: Great Britain, France and China in the Global Governance of Nuclear Arms*. New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Transaction, 1996. 354pp. \$34.95

The most salient feature of nuclear weapons is their singularity. I.I. Rabi, the Nobel laureate in physics, witnessed the birth of the atomic age. So moved was he by what he had seen that morning in July 1945 that he offered the following appreciation: “A new thing had just been born; a new control; a new understanding of man, which man had acquired over nature.” The advent of nuclear weapons therefore wrought a revolution in the management of large-scale organizations (as exemplified by the Manhattan Project), in the conduct of statecraft, and the concomitant operation of deterrence itself. Robert McNamara, a former U.S. Secretary of Defense, noted this phenomenological development in a particularly revealing observation: “Nuclear warheads are not military weapons in the traditional sense and therefore serve no military purpose other than to deter one’s opponent from their use.” In McNamara’s caveat, then, lies the single politico-strategic *raison d’être* for possession: deterrence.

In this book, Bruce D. Larkin makes explicit the connection between nuclear capability—that of Great Britain, France, and China—and political influence over great power behavior: “Anyone considering nuclear futures must take the British, French, and Chinese forces into account. How Britain, France, and China respond to nuclear futures must have enormous impact on what global future is chosen.” The recognition of the operational dynamics of deterrence in this context is one of the most important contributions of *Nuclear Designs*. Larkin’s basic thesis, then, is that these three “minipowers” (as he calls them) are the only nuclear states armed

with sufficient thermonuclear capability to exert decisive leverage over the United States and Russia, and ultimately abandon their own nuclear weapons. These “minipowers” would be the exemplars not only to the great powers but also to the other nuclear aspirants, such as India, Pakistan, and Israel.

Having thus presented what is clearly an operational definition of nuclear deterrence, Larkin advances a thesis that appears to be paradoxical: the advocacy of denuclearization and with it the abandonment of the very instrumentality for geostrategic influence in a world of sovereign nation-states. Thus he declares, “I see no reason to be sympathetic to nuclearists who imagine that their states gain by holding nuclear weapons—gain in prestige, or ‘influence,’ or economic access, or deference . . . because I believe that holding people at risk of incineration to achieve prestige or satisfy greed cannot possibly be consistent with a secure global future.” The great paradox of *Nuclear Designs* is that Larkin has pursued a path to a non-nuclearist future, paved as it were with the instruments of thermonuclear deterrents. His conclusion is illustrative: “China, France, and Britain could choose to bring their weight to bear on Russia and the United States, either toward fuller disengagement, or to abolition itself.”

In this manner, Larkin has identified the primary feature of the nuclear age, described so eloquently by Sir Winston Churchill as “a stage . . . where safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation.” Larkin presents a superbly researched analysis that draws heavily from primary and secondary literatures. Yet what he has forgotten is Churchill’s assessment of the “Game of Nations” in the nuclear age. It fell to Francis Pym, the British minister of defence, speaking in the House of Commons on 15 July 1980, to remind us all of the comparatively small price paid by civilization for nuclear deterrence—nuclear peace. Britain’s “deterrent capability exists to preserve the peace. It exists not to be used. It is the threat of the use that is the deterrent. It is not as expensive as a war.” This is an assertion that has no answer, save recognition of its existential reality, which Larkin rejects. Nevertheless, *Nuclear Designs* presents a systematic and credible assessment of the nuclear weapons establishments of Great Britain, France, and China, and it is especially strong in its presentation of technical data on weapons systems. This study advances the most authoritative and passionate argument for the abolition of nuclear weapons, and on that account it may become the definitive work for students of conflict resolution and peace research.

Myron A. Greenberg
Author of *Physics and Metaphysics of Deterrence:
The British Approach*
(Newport Paper Number Eight)