

Book Review
By
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John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism To Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 319

Dawn of nuclear age set in an 'obsession' with nuclear weapons leading to charting of unwise policies with potentially destructive consequences. Historical record, of past decades, informs us that, the US policy-makers and their allies in the scientific community have exaggerated destructive abilities of the bomb. Yet, nuclear weapons have not been the cause of historical events during the Cold War and in subsequent years. Impact of nuclear weapons and the technology have in fact been mostly 'irrelevant' in the larger framework of international system, yet they have had deep influence in shaping thinking of the policymakers. And, it, argues John Mueller, is the ultimate dogma that has held the US nuclear policy hostage for over fifty years.

Divided into three sections, spread over fifteen chapters, *Atomic Obsession* deconstructs several myths and assumptions associated with impact of nuclear weapons on policy making, spread of nuclear technology and possibilities of nuclear terrorism. The author examines the fundamental belief systems underpinning the nuclear-arms enterprise in some detail. Without mincing words, Mueller, is of the view that destructive power of nuclear weapons have been vastly exaggerated. Their role in his opinion in bringing, an end to World-War II was insignificant as Germany had already surrendered and Japan would have surrendered in few weeks; and, the US and Soviet Union exhausted from the Second World War would never have gone to another war even in the absence of nuclear deterrence.

The author also terms arms-control agreements concluded between Moscow and Washington at the height of Cold War, as an eyewash and total waste of time. More starkly, he asserts threat of nuclear proliferation is also greatly inflated. And, the very means used to prevent proliferation of nuclear arms i.e., economic and military sanctions, and political isolation drive countries to develop a nuclear deterrent capability. Moreover, he considers, the prospects of a terrorist group getting hands on a nuclear bomb, or fissile materials or associated paraphernalia "vanishingly small".

At a more abstract level, Mueller, argues that nuclear weapons are far insignificant as threats and, more as deterrents than has been theorized by academics and believed by policy-practitioners. Under-cutting the predominant belief, he asserts that atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki didn't force Japan to surrender, but it was Soviet declaration of war on Japan that did. During Cold War, Moscow and Washington had an inherent interest in avoiding war, which kept the peace, not the 'balance of terror', as claimed by nuclear optimists. Washington sought to apply nuclear deterrence to deter Soviet Union from doing what it had no intention of doing. In the process US spent more than \$5 trillion on its nuclear-arms. In the post-Cold War era, that bloated nuclear arsenal has been rendered 'useless'.

Similarly, from a military standpoint, nuclear weapons have been operationally unfeasible, primarily because of an inability to choose suitable targets, or the ones, that couldn't be attacked effectively through conventional means. Then why use nuclear weapons? Moreover, nuclear factor drastically increases the escalation spiral, constraining the decision-makers' ability to manipulate the risk, as they would have done with smart usage of conventional armaments.

Yet, nuclear weapons and technology have had a substantial influence on arms races, deterrence, non-proliferation efforts countering nuclear terrorism, and above all, diplomatic engagement with potential nuclear aspirants. The quest to check the spread of nuclear weapons technology has led to 'unwise and destructive' policies. To check proliferation, the US threatens those seeking nuclear arms. Iran and North Korea feel threatened, thus, they embarked on a quest to build nuclear technology. China, the author claims, had developed nuclear weapons because it felt threatened by the US. Thus, in a piece of advice which Washington is definitely not going to heed, Mueller asserts, stop 'threatening countries' if you want to promote non-proliferation. Great powers like Russia, China and developing nations also posit the same argument, while US continues to ignore it.

Mueller's analysis appears provocative and convincing at the same time. It comes as a breath of fresh air amidst the mainstream academic and policy discourse. He forces the reader to question the inherent tenets of the nuclear theories and deterrence precepts. A question, not addressed by him is, if

nuclear weapons are that irrelevant, as he argues, then, how can fear of their destructive capabilities lead to pursuit of such unwise policies? Despite little real consequential impact on historical events, crises and international politics have progressed under a nuclear shadow for past seven decades. Third world war did not break out, but, presence of nuclear weapons has had an impact on the course of relations among nations and great powers, in turn influencing international political system.

Another complexity in regard to such issues is determining causality. It is far easier to explain why an event took place, then understanding why it didn't. Granted, the US nuclear policy has suffered from threat inflation and exaggeration of utility of nuclear weapons besides proliferation potential have led to costly policy choices. Realistically, the chances of actual use of nuclear weapons, any where in the world have remained minimal, and the threat of nuclear terrorism is actually overstated. Yet, the policy dilemma is that all these are of low probability, but potentially devastating impact. In our complex international system, occurrence of such high-impact events cannot be ruled out. What do policy-makers do when such low probability events happen? This has also forced Chinese policy-makers to explore responses to a nuclear emergency contingency in the neighborhood due to domestic instability.

Nonetheless, *Atomic Obsession* is one of those books which challenges the mainstream discourse. Fifteen chapters of scholarship and deep policy analysis through decades of research makes the book a valuable addition to literature on nuclear policy and deterrence. Divided in short chapters, concise paragraphs comprising pithy sentences, the book makes engaging reading. Mueller convincingly questions the scared truths of nuclear policy, deterrence, proliferation, and threat of nuclear terrorism. It is for these reasons that the book is a must-read for leaders making decisions involving nuclear weapons, policy-practitioners, academics, and students of nuclear weapons policy around the world.

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