

The lessons of Hiroshima must not drift away

The morning of August 6, 1945, dawned clear and sunny as the Enola Gay wheeled over Hiroshima and dropped its payload on the city centre. The 15kt uranium bomb exploded 600 metres above the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, instantly flattening everything and everyone below. Only the skeletal structure of the hall remained, bearing witness to the moment when our beliefs about weapons and wars changed.

The concept of deterrence

In the intervening 78 years, we have witnessed the rise and fall of nuclear threats. The concept of nuclear deterrence attracted the sharpest minds in countries that both possessed nuclear weapons and abjured them. Especially as nuclear weapons became more powerful, it became clear that any nuclear use would be a global problem. This allowed a parallel development to occur: even as nuclear weapons states developed ever more destructive nukes, a taboo against their actual use began to develop. The political scientist Nina Tannenwald has defined the nuclear taboo as a coalescing norm against using nuclear weapons because these weapons are seen as so beyond the pale that there are almost no circumstances in which their use can be justified. Crucially, this taboo extends across the whole class of weapons, regardless of their yield, leading to a blanket prohibition of use that each passing year reinforces. However, this taboo has no legal basis; it rests on ideas of morality, proportionality and responsibility.

The taboo is grounded firmly in our treating nuclear weapons as different: nuclear weapons, in Bernard Brodie's celebrated phrase, are the 'absolute weapon'. This special treatment is grounded not so much in the power of the atomic bomb – we are able to dial up or down the destructive capability of modern nukes, and we have developed conventional munitions that rival some nuclear destructiveness; or even in the ability to flatten a city in moments. The special status of nuclear weapons rests on the continually reaffirmed knowledge gained from the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that nuclear weapons are indiscriminate and do not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants; they contaminate the environment for decades; and the effects of the



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radiation are felt for generations. There are people in Japan still living with the consequences of August 1945.

Testing these notions

Events since Russia's invasion of Ukraine have tested our notions of deterrence and the taboo. Russian President Vladimir Putin has issued several veiled and not-so-veiled nuclear threats, ranging from reminding the world of Russia's nuclear weapons status at the start of the war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022 to ordering Russia's nuclear forces into a 'special regime of combat duty' a few days later (which left analysts scrambling to decode what that formulation might mean), to declaring in September 2022 that Russia was prepared to 'make use of all weapon systems available to [them]'. This is not a bluff. Dmitry Medvedev, currently deputy chairman of the Security Council of Russia and others have echoed Mr. Putin's threats.

Thirty-eight years after the leaders Ronald Reagan of the United States and Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union declared that 'a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought' (and less than a year after Mr. Putin and President Joe Biden reaffirmed this pledge in June 2021), Russia was raising the spectre of nuclear Armageddon in Europe.

Future historians will decide how credible these threats were. Potentially, September and October 2022 might come to be regarded as a time when the nuclear taboo was tested almost to breaking point. Following battlefield reversals in late summer and Mr. Putin's declaration that Russia was prepared to use 'all weapons systems available', speculation arose about whether Russia might use a tactical nuclear weapon and if so, where and how.

This was dangerous on multiple counts. To begin with, this conjecture risked creating expectations of its own that might have pushed the Russian leadership to behave in a certain way. Loose talk about what sort of nuclear weapons might be acceptable to 'send a message' also risked undermining the nuclear taboo. And finally, there is still no consensus on what constitutes a tactical nuclear weapon. Battlefield or tactical weapons (as opposed to strategic weapons) are delivered over shorter distances and are smaller than strategic weapons, but

beyond that, there is significant variability in yield, depending on the delivery method. The U.S., for example, has tactical weapons ranging from a fraction of 1kt to 170kt. The bomb that fell on Hiroshima was 15kt. It would be beyond insulting to the memory of the estimated 70,000 people who died immediately and the many tens of thousands of *hibakusha* who have lived with the consequences of that bomb to suggest that this was just a small, tactical weapon.

The responses

There is, however, room for hope in the official responses by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and other nuclear weapons states to Mr. Putin's sabre-rattling and the subsequent speculation. The U.S. was at the forefront on this, and what it did do is as important as what it did not do. Washington made it abundantly clear that any nuclear use would be met with a very strong and commensurate response. However, it did not specify that that response would be nuclear: quite the opposite, as it emphasised a calibrated, conventional response to any nuclear adventurism at NATO's doorstep.

The U.S. also did not change its nuclear preparedness, thereby not fuelling the nuclear speculation building up in Europe. Crucially, in November, even China's President Xi Jinping called on the international community to 'jointly oppose the use of, or threats to use, nuclear weapons'.

That nuclear crisis passed, but the world could still be held hostage to Russia's movement of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, at Minsk's invitation. Like Ukraine, Belarus gave up its nuclear weapons in the 1990s in return for security guarantees from Russia, the U.S. and the United Kingdom. Reversing that agreement now seems a pointless provocation – high on symbolism and risk.

At the height of the Cold War, there were almost 70,000 nuclear weapons scattered around the globe, either in storage or deployed, some on hair trigger warnings. That we avoided a nuclear exchange is down in part to the lessons of Hiroshima, and in part to sheer, dumb luck, as the history of near misses throughout the Cold War demonstrates.

As an insurance policy, it is not much.

America's pursuit of Saudi-Israel rapprochement

The proverbial propensity of the 'Middle East' to spring surprises is on call again. This time it is about the chances of success of dogged, albeit quiet, United States diplomacy to reconcile two regional powerhouses, viz. Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Ironically, this quest by the Biden administration is taking place under challenging circumstances. The White House has had tepid relations with leaders of both countries, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman. Mr. Netanyahu heads an extreme right-wing coalition determined to accelerate the Jewish settlements in the Occupied West Bank and curb the judiciary's independence – the U.S. strongly opposes both. Under the Saudi Crown Prince, initially ostracised by the Biden Administration for his alleged involvement in the Jamal Khashoggi murder, the Kingdom has been nonchalant towards Washington.

Saudi initiatives

After nearly eight decades of the U.S.-Saudi "Energy for Security" compact of 1945, Riyadh has been assiduously diversifying its strategic options. It has reconciled, at least tactically, with its arch-enemy Iran through Chinese mediation, hosted the Chinese President for three summits in Riyadh (President Xi Jinping met separately with his counterparts in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab Countries), cooperated with Russia under the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries-Plus (OPEC+) rubric for higher oil prices and facilitated the return of Syria to the Arab fold. All these in-your-face Saudi initiatives challenge the U.S. interests. They dissuade President Joe Biden's bid for re-election next year. Against this obstructive backdrop, the White House has waged a concerted campaign to persuade Saudi Arabia to normalise its relations with Israel. The proposal has been on the Saudi table since November 2020



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when the Saudi Crown Prince and Mr. Netanyahu had an unpublished meeting in Neom, Saudi Arabia, in the presence of the then-U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. It has gained traction in recent months with the U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken visiting Saudi Arabia to be received by the Saudi Crown Prince. While the Saudis have not rejected the idea out of hand, they have reportedly put forth daunting pre-conditions said to include North Atlantic Treaty Organization-like U.S. security guarantees, access to advanced American weapons systems, approval for the acquisition of civilian nuclear technology, and an Israeli commitment to a process leading to a two-state solution with the Palestinians. The specifics are under negotiation among the three tight-lipped stakeholders.

A convergence, but with different motives

While the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel may converge at the proposed reconciliation, their respective motives differ. First, the Biden administration, deeply concerned with the growing ingress by China and Russia in the "Middle East", wants to re-entrench the Pax Americana over the region by bringing two traditionally pro-west regional players together. It also feels that fostering such a reconciliation would ingratiate Mr. Biden with the two miffed leaders. Lastly, the powerful Jewish lobby's gratitude would help Mr. Biden win the U.S. presidential election next year.

Saudi Arabia under the Saudi Crown Prince has adopted an assertive and ambitious foreign policy, commensurate with its oil wealth, to become *primus inter pares* for the region and emerge as an important global player. By reconciling with Israel, it takes away the first movers' advantage that the United Arab Emirates has had for the past three years as a member of the "Abraham Accords". Moreover, diplomatic ties with Israel would balance the Kingdom's

recent reconciliation with Iran and Syria and help it emerge as a more nationalist power than an Islamic one. Despite its moves, Riyadh needs a stronger U.S. security commitment and access to Israeli technology. The Saudi Crown Prince may, however, need to mitigate the scepticism about Israel at home and within Al-Saud.

For Israel, a Star of David flying in Riyadh would be a major geopolitical victory, symbolising its final acceptance as a legitimate Jewish state by the centre of Islam after 75 years as a regional outcast. Given the Kingdom's trendsetting role as the custodian of Islam's two holy shrines, the Riyadh-Tel Aviv détente would herald Israel's integration with the Arab-Islamic world. It would provide direct air and land access to Asia, enabling better leveraging of the economic opportunities as the economic centre of gravity shifts eastwards.

The wider impact

The global fallout from such a development would be quite profound. The Islamic mainstream would likely follow the Saudi lead, with countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia in the first row. However, it would further marginalise the "Palestinians' Cause" and may polarise and radicalise them and other opponents of Israel such as Iran and Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic State.

Having invested considerable diplomatic capital in this quest, the U.S. may eventually succeed despite the formidable odds, particularly as the Israeli government would have to moderate some of its hard-held policies.

Saudi-Israeli rapprochement would have a mildly positive impact on India. It would remove a contradiction in India's regional policy and better align Saudi Arabia with us. It may open opportunities as the U.S. pushes back China from the region. But then, it may also give Israel reasons to hyphenate India with Islamic countries, including Pakistan.