Rethinking National Security
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Summary
When World War II ended in 1945, our nation was totally secure from attack. Since then, we have invested trillions of dollars in an effort to improve our national security. We have applied some of our brightest minds in an effort to maximize the value of that investment. Yet we now can be destroyed in under an hour. What went wrong?

In mathematics, an absurd result from a logical line of reasoning proves that at least one underlying assumption must be false. While other factors might have played a role in producing our dilemma, this paper critically examines a number of assumptions that are currently taken for granted about national security, starting with the concept itself. The primary thesis of this paper is that national security is becoming inseparable from global security.

Caveat
That thesis will sound Pollyannaish to many, especially those who have suffered the experience of dealing with our nation’s adversaries on the battlefield or at the negotiating table. I therefore want to emphasize that I am posing a vision for the future that can only be attained via a long-term process of change. Those who worry that this vision will allow our adversaries to take advantage of us can put their concerns aside. This paper, by itself, will not have that kind of an impact.

National security is a deeply entrenched concept, supported by the experience of centuries of warfare. But nuclear weapons and other technological developments have changed the environment in fundamental ways that we have not yet fully comprehended or acted upon. As Albert Einstein famously said at the dawn of the nuclear age, “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.” [Nathan and Norden 1981, page 376]

The current state of the world is unstable, but we cannot jump to a stable end-state. Other nations also must join in the process, adding to its complexity. The first step is to pose the vision and open our own minds to its possibility, safe in the knowledge that our existing national security structures have enough inertia to prevent a dangerous jump. Posing that vision is the purpose of this paper.
Is national security becoming inseparable from global security?

We usually act as if national security made sense in and of itself, but nuclear weapons, other WMD technologies, cyber warfare, and terrorism are making national security increasingly inseparable from global security.

Economically depressed North Korea’s arsenal proves that almost any nation that truly desires nuclear weapons can obtain them. While that nation’s contempt for South Korea and its desire to reunify the peninsula on its own terms played a role in transforming that nation into the nuclear-armed menace it is today, our focus on national security also contributed. Thinking solely in terms of our own security led us to seek crippling sanctions and hope that, if they did not bring North Korea to heel, they would help bring about the overthrow of the Kim dynasty. Fear of that result played a role in North Korea’s decision to seek a nuclear deterrent capable of hitting the American homeland—the only way that it could deter us.

Unless it is truly in our nation’s vital interests to do otherwise, we may need to treat every nation with the respect it would deserve if it already had nuclear weapons. Otherwise, we will unwittingly encourage nuclear proliferation and additional threats to our homeland. The time to treat a nation with respect is before it has nuclear weapons, not after. And, unfortunately, we often fail to treat even nuclear-armed nations with adequate respect.

Global security appears to warrant greater consideration as a possibility than we have accorded it to date.

Have nuclear weapons kept the peace?

We have not experienced a world war in 72 years, leading many to believe that nuclear weapons have kept the peace. Chicago University Professor John Mearsheimer has even called them “weapons of peace.” [Mearsheimer 2012]

While caution induced by nuclear weapons may have lengthened the time between world wars, has it done so to the point that society’s current complacency is justified? Even if the risk of World War III were only 1-in-500 each year (so we could expect to go 500 years before it occurred), the cumulative risk over the roughly 90 year life expectancy of a child born today would be close to 1-in-6, the risk in Russian roulette. Are we playing Russian roulette with the next generation of Americans?

Several additional questions deserve our attention, including: Have the last 72 years been peaceful enough to justify the assumption that “nuclear weapons have kept the peace,” or is that an oversimplification? Has believing that nuclear weapons kept the peace caused us to behave in ways that hurt our national security?
What is a nuclear umbrella?
We often speak of extending our nuclear umbrella to our allies. To what extent is that analogy a good one, and to what extent is it misleading? A student in one of my classes, Katy Ferron, suggested that the nuclear umbrella may be made of tin foil. That would protect us in a light rain shower, but could turn deadly in a thunderstorm.

Does our nuclear umbrella embolden our allies in ways that make major crises (and therefore nuclear devastation of our homeland) more likely? In November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian jet near its border with Syria. Would Turkey have taken that action if it were not protected by our NATO security guarantees? How much danger was there of a crisis ensuing?

Along similar lines, Ulrich Weisser, who was head of the policy and planning staff in the German Ministry of Defense, warned:

Moscow also feels provoked by the behavior of a number of newer NATO member states in central and Eastern Europe. Poland and the Baltic states use every opportunity to make provocative digs at Russia; they feel themselves protected by NATO and backed by the U.S. [Weisser 2007]

Is our nuclear arsenal safe, secure, and effective?
Many high officials have stated that our nuclear arsenal is safe, secure, and effective. For example, President Obama, in his 2009 Prague speech that committed the United States “to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons” also said: “As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies.” [Obama 2009] Is that assertion a fact or an assumption? If it is an assumption, how true is it?

The recently leaked draft of the Trump administration’s Nuclear Posture Review uses similar language: “The U.S. must have the ability to maintain and certify a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal.” [Department of Defense 2018]

Sometimes, reliable or credible is used instead of effective as in a 2008 Defense Defense Science Board report which recommended that, “The national security leadership should declare, unequivocally and frequently, that a reliable, safe, secure, and credible nuclear deterrent is essential to national security, and is a continuing high national priority.” [Defense Science Board 2008]

Safe and secure have specialized meanings within the nuclear weapons complex that are very different from how most people interpret them. According to a 2016 DoD handbook, nuclear weapons safety requires that, “There shall be positive measures to prevent nuclear weapons involved in accidents, incidents, or jettisoned weapons, from producing a nuclear yield.” [ODASDM 2016] Safe as used within the nuclear weapons complex says nothing
about the safety of our relying on nuclear weapons. Yet statements such as Obama’s have a tendency to calm public concern about nuclear weapons in general, not just that there might be a nuclear explosion if a bomber crashes.

That same DoD handbook defines nuclear weapons security: “Nuclear weapons security refers to the range of active and passive measures employed to protect a weapon from access by unauthorized personnel and to prevent loss or damage.” The handbook does not define either effective or credible, but a 1980 exchange between Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Senator John Glenn, while somewhat flippant, says something about the credibility of our nuclear deterrent: [Senate Foreign Relations Committee 1980]

Senator Glenn: I get lost in what is credible and not credible. This whole thing gets so incredible when you consider wiping out whole nations, it is difficult to establish credibility.

Secretary Brown: That is why we sound a little crazy when we talk about it.

Is a more reliable nuclear arsenal necessarily more effective?

It has been tacitly assumed that a more reliable nuclear arsenal is more effective, but a highly reliable nuclear arsenal encourages a first-strike mentality and therefore increases crisis instability. In contrast, a somewhat less reliable arsenal would be useful primarily in second-strike mode, thereby improving crisis stability. Finding the optimal level of reliability is a critically important problem that appears to have been overlooked.

Is nuclear terrorism a greater risk than nuclear war?

In a March 2014 press conference, President Obama stated: “Russia’s actions are a problem [but] they don’t pose the number-one national security threat to the United States. I continue to be much more concerned when it comes to our security with the prospect of a nuclear weapon going off in Manhattan.” [Obama 2014]

The video documentary, Nuclear Tipping Point, shows former Secretary of State and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell saying: “The real threat now is not from states that understand that we cannot use these weapons without inviting suicidal response but terrorists who do not care about suicidal response, terrorists who are prepared to commit suicide themselves.” [Nuclear Threat Initiative 2010, 2:42]

Closer examination raises serious questions about this assumption that nuclear terrorism has replaced nuclear war as the greatest risk facing our nation, using the usual definition of risk as likelihood times loss. A nuclear terrorist attack, even with a weapon comparable to those used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, would be unlikely to kill more than 100,000 people. In contrast, and using President Obama’s example, a nuclear war with Russia would be likely to kill at least a billion people. That 10,000-to-1 ratio means that nuclear war would
have to be at least 10,000 times less likely than nuclear terrorism for the latter to be the greater risk. That seems unlikely, especially since the chance of a nuclear war would be elevated in the chaos following a nuclear terrorist attack.

Even though nuclear terrorism appears to be a much smaller risk than nuclear war, both are huge and deserve much more attention than they are currently getting.

In what ways does our large military arsenal help our national security, and in what ways might it have a negative effect?
While our superiority in conventional arms would give us an initial advantage in a war with any other nation, if that nation has nuclear weapons, it would be tempted to use nuclear threats to avoid a humiliating defeat. If such threats occur, would our current nuclear arsenal of roughly 7,000 nuclear weapons give us an advantage?

A 1995 USSTRATCOM report recommended:

> Because of the value that comes from the ambiguity of what the US may do to an adversary if the acts we seek to deter are carried out, it hurts to portray ourselves as too fully rational and cool-headed. … That the US may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be part of the national persona we project to all adversaries. [USSTRATCOM 1995]

What happens if both we and an adversary follow that strategy?

Has our conventional superiority encouraged us to take actions that have hurt our national security, including risking nuclear war? The memoirs of American Gen. Wesley Clark, who was NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe during the 1999 Kosovo Crisis, and the memoirs of his subordinate, British Lt. Gen. Sir Mike Jackson, agree that Clark ordered Jackson to take action that risked armed conflict with Russian troops. Their memoirs also agree that a heated argument ensued which ended when Jackson refused to carry out the order.

Where Clark’s and Jackson’s memoirs differ is on their perceptions of the risk involved. When Jackson refused to carry out Clark’s order, he said, “Sir, I’m not going to start World War Three for you.” [Jackson 2007, page 272] In contrast, Clark “expected that when NATO met the Russians with determination and a show of strength, the Russians would back down.” [Clark 2001, page 395] Did our overwhelming conventional superiority contribute to Gen. Clark’s confidence, and if so, how much risk did it create for our nation’s security?

Is nuclear diplomacy with “rogue nations” such as North Korea and Iran a waste of time?
Contrary to the conventional wisdom, nuclear diplomacy probably stopped North Korea from developing a nuclear weapon while our main nuclear agreement with it was in force.
Known as the 1994 Agreed Framework, this agreement prevented North Korea from accessing its plutonium stockpile until we ended the agreement in 2002. North Korea then re-started plutonium production and did its first nuclear test four years later, in 2006.

The 1994 Agreed Framework also stopped North Korea from completing two large nuclear reactors that would have made enough plutonium for hundreds of nuclear weapons by now, yet it never received the more proliferation-resistant replacement reactors we promised to provide. The original reactors corroded so badly from eight years of exposure to the elements that they had to be abandoned.

Does the history of our nuclear diplomacy with North Korea have any lessons for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons?

What are the criteria for calling these nations rogues? Do any of our allies meet any of those criteria? Do we?

Is the United States the world’s sole remaining superpower?

What does it mean to be a superpower? Could a superpower be destroyed in under an hour? Would its wars have produced the results we have seen in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya? If possessing immense destructive power makes a nation a superpower, does Russia qualify? China? North Korea?

Are we the world’s sole remaining conventional superpower? In the nuclear age, what are the advantages to being its only conventional superpower? What are the disadvantages and risks?

If we are wrong in believing that we are the world’s sole remaining superpower, has that mistaken belief caused us to take actions that have hurt our national security? Has it encouraged nuclear proliferation?

What are the components of American power that qualify us as a superpower? Do we need to put more emphasis on non-military components of American power?

Are our nation’s foreign and military policies well thought out?

Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya bring that assumption into question for conventional warfare. Former Secretary of Defense William Perry’s recent book does the same at the nuclear level:

Our [nuclear] deterrent forces were also weighed on a political scale: do they give us parity with the forces of the Soviet Union? I did not regard that as the key issue, but I can testify that during the Cold War, no US president was willing to accept nuclear forces smaller than those of the Soviet Union. And I believe that this
perceived imperative did more to drive the nuclear arms race than did the need for deterrence. [Perry 2015, page 46]

**It is often said that Russia has nothing to fear from NATO expansion. Is that true?**

Even though NATO was formed as a military alliance in opposition to the Soviet Union, in February 2010, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told a group of Moscow university students, “This is a new NATO … Its enemy is not Russia.” [Ferris-Rotman 2010]

Her vision was not shared by the new, Eastern European members of NATO whose history leads them to fear Russia. The 2008 Georgian War, in which Russia sided with two breakaway Georgian provinces, added to their fear and created fears in the West in general. In July 2009, a number of former leaders of Eastern European nations wrote an open letter to President Obama warning that, “It was a mistake not to commence with proper Article 5 defense planning for new members after NATO was enlarged.” [Adamkus et al 2009]

NATO’s Article 5 states that an attack on any member shall be considered an attack on them all. Thus, for example, if the Russian pilot who was killed when his jet was shot down in November 2015 by the Turks had detected the attack and shot down the Turkish jets in self-defense, Turkey could have demanded that we treat it as if the Russians had shot down one of our own planes. And Turkey might well have hidden the reason that the Russian pilot fired, leading American public opinion to demand a strong response.

When NATO expansion first occurred in the late 1990’s then Secretary of Defense William Perry saw it as so dangerous that he considered resigning in protest [Perry 2015, page 129].

**Can a single individual, make a difference on such a large issue?**

The people we call our leaders actually follow our lead since, if they get too far ahead of us, they lose their positions of power. For that reason, major societal shifts, such as the abolition of slavery, started with ordinary citizens questioning the conventional wisdom of their day.

The ratification of the New START Treaty provides an excellent example of the power of ordinary citizens to effect significant change. To get a floor vote on New START, it first had to be approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where it was bottled up in September 2010. Republican Senator Johnny Isakson of Georgia was an undecided, key vote.

A concerted effort by several NGOs got approximately 600 constituents to call his office during the three days prior to the committee vote. Isakson voted to bring the treaty to a floor.
vote, but without saying how he would vote on the floor. In December, when the floor vote took place, a similar effort was mounted and Isakson voted in favor of the treaty.

While 600 phone calls in three days make a significant impression on a senator, those callers were only 0.006 percent of Georgia’s population. I am aware of these events because I supported the effort financially and spoke with several of the participating NGOs.

Can this “Isakson effect” be replicated? Is it being replicated now, but so quietly that it is not generally recognized? What forms of citizen lobbying are most effective?

Another way that individuals can help bring about fundamental changes in our thinking about national security is to experiment with greater diplomacy at the interpersonal level. A book my wife and I wrote explores that possibility in detail and argues that “the changes we’ve implemented in our relationship that allowed us to avoid needless arguments are the same ones the nations of the world need to make to avoid getting into needless wars.” [Hellman and Hellman 2016, page 92].

For example, to dent the cycle of our fights, we needed to “get curious, not furious” and ask more questions before going to war with one another. If more Americans had done that in 2003 before we invaded Iraq, we might have unmasked the false narratives that Saddam Hussein had been involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks and that he had WMDs. In the interests of space, the interested reader is referred to the section “Where the Personal and Global Meet” [Hellman and Hellman 2016, pp. 21-25], which describes a number of other advantages to combining interpersonal and international diplomacy.

Questioning Goes Both Ways

Those of us who raise questions about the current approach to national security also need to be open to questioning our own thinking as illustrated by the following personal story.

For many years I have questioned efforts to modernize our nuclear arsenal. Given that the stated purpose of these weapons is to prevent them from ever being used, why do we need more modern ones? The old ones seem destructive enough as a deterrent. Worse, modernization would improve our first strike capability. In the Alice in Wonderland world of nuclear weapons that seemingly positive quality becomes a negative one by undermining strategic stability. [Kristensen et al 2017] It would encourage our adversaries, as well as us, to strike early in a nuclear crisis, thereby increasing the risk of war.

I could not see any good reason to modernize until about ten years ago, when I met Dr. Joseph Martz who had just played a key role on the Los Alamos team that designed their version of a new nuclear weapon known as the RRW (Reliable Replacement Warhead). Martz impressed me both technically and personally, so I asked why he thought we needed a new warhead.
He explained that our current weapons were designed when we were trying to fit as many warheads as possible onto a single rocket, leading to what he termed “a Ferrari warhead design.” Martz saw the RRW design as simpler and safer. The RRW would use insensitive high explosives to start the nuclear reaction, whereas many of our current nuclear warheads use conventional high explosives that are more easily set off by accident. He also hoped that the simpler RRW design would allow us to greatly reduce the size of our nuclear arsenal since it could be replenished rapidly if world events dictated that need. In Martz’s view, our ability to construct the weapons, rather than the weapons themselves, would be our deterrent.

His analysis showed me that the issue was more complex than I had thought. I changed my previous position that there were no good reasons to modernize. There were risks, but there also were some advantages. Only respectful dialog can determine the best approach and, if global security is becoming inseparable from national security, a totally new approach that takes that into account is likely to be needed.

Whether modernization is good or bad is not the point of this story. Rather, it illustrates how everyone, myself included, is subject to error and needs to be open to new perspectives that contradict our current beliefs.

**Your Role in Rethinking National Security**

I hope that the above discussion stimulated your thinking about the question raised in the first paragraph of this paper: What might have caused the trillions of dollars we spent over the last 72 years trying to improve our national security to result in a nation that can be destroyed in under an hour?

I also hope that you will take the assumptions listed here as just a starting point. As you hear or read the news, you will find many more questionable assumptions that masquerade as self-evident truths. When you do, I encourage you to think through whether they are true and, if not true, whether we react in ways that harm our national security when we mistakenly believe them.

I also encourage you to think of innovative ways that might allow you to make a difference on this issue and then experiment with those approaches. Many of those experiments will fail, but it only takes one to succeed. Given what is at stake, such experiments may be the most important thing you could ever do.

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References


