

History is the key to making sense of nuclear weapons

July 22 2015, by Holger Nehrin



Credit: US Dept of Energy, via Wikimedia Commons

In the early days of his first term, US president Barack Obama gave a [speech](#) in Prague in which he called for a world without nuclear weapons. His argument was based on a risk assessment:

In a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of nuclear attack has gone up. More nations have acquired these weapons. Testing has continued. Black market trade in

nuclear secrets abound. The technology to build the bomb has spread. Terrorists are determined to buy, build or steal one.

Even leaving aside the recent historic deal with Iran, this is a problematic interpretation. It ignores the important historical context. As far as the risk of [nuclear weapons](#) is concerned, there is no fundamental difference between the Cold War and today's world. [Research](#) has found that terrorist groups are not too keen to acquire nuclear devices. Most of the countries that Western societies would regard as especially risky today (such as Iran and North Korea, Pakistan and India) already began their nuclear programmes during the Cold War. Moreover, history has shown that what matters in terms of risk is not whether or not a country has nuclear weapons: it's what it intends to do with them. And that we often don't exactly know.

Plenty of accidents or near-miss situations arose during the Cold War and afterwards. Think of the Cuban missile crisis in autumn 1962 or the Able Archer incident of 1983, where the Soviet Union almost mistook a NATO military exercise for a real nuclear attack. In January 1995, Norway launched a Brant XII rocket to explore the northern lights. Russia initially regarded this as an attack and activated its defences, prepared to strike back. Accidents involving nuclear weapons continue to happen: There were [158 fires at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston](#) between 2000 and 2011, and [266 fires on UK nuclear submarines](#) since the end of the Cold War or the [collision](#) of two British and French nuclear submarines, HMS Vanguard and Le Triomphant.

Mathematical probability of risk is one thing, but perception of risk is quite another. Perceptions matter. By talking about risk people create communities: those who are fighting to prevent risks become the insiders, while those seen as responsible for the risks become the outsiders.

The bottom line: Talking about risk is complicated. We assess risk not just via rational calculation, but through a number of assumptions we make about the politics and ideology as well as the stability and national sovereignty of certain countries. In general, we are more inclined to talk about the risk posed by other countries than that posed by our own.



Still in the ground. Credit: Huntster via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY

Us and them

Many politicians in the West would argue that nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan and nuclear weapons for Iran are intrinsically more

dangerous than, say, those in the US, the UK, France and Israel, even though the vast majority of the world's nuclear weapons are still owned by the US and Russia. There are around 17,265 operational nuclear weapons around the world. Significantly more than 90% of these are kept in Russia and the US.

Yes, the politics and general foreign policy stance of countries such as Iran matter. But we can often detect a subtext of colonial attitudes in Western assessments of non-Western nuclear powers: some countries, so the reasoning goes, just seem not up to having nuclear weapons; they appear as sloppy with safety, and dominated by religious fanatics or ancient feuds.

Making such assumptions unthinkingly comes with its own risks, not least encouraging states to pursue the weapons even more doggedly. Nuclear weapons thus become a symbol of leaving the colonial past behind and to achieving national sovereignty. If anything, that makes them more attractive for those countries. India claimed in 1974 that it had conducted a "[peaceful nuclear explosion](#)", a "demonstration". This was seen at the time as hard proof that India must be looking to become a nuclear power, given the country's long feud with Pakistan. Some historical evidence we now have suggests that this assumption was misguided. In 1998, then, India [announced](#) that it was now a nuclear-weapons state, also because it had nothing to lose by saying so.

The general international context matters, too. There are underlying historical and geopolitical legacies that make nuclear proliferation more likely. India and Pakistan's nuclear weapons are not what has destabilised the subcontinent; the unrest in the region is just as much a legacy of British colonialism. An analogous interpretation can be applied to Iran.

It's also important to bear in mind that risk assessments and policies can change over time. China, which may now be regarded as a relatively low

risk, also had the status of a rogue state. It carried out its first nuclear test in 1964. At the time, the country was in domestic turmoil. China under Mao was already gearing up towards the atrocities of the cultural revolution, and it actively supported the Viet Cong against US in Vietnam.

But in the 1970s, Nixon and Kissinger nonetheless engaged in "[ping-pong diplomacy](#)" with China and defused deep and abiding tensions. Today, China poses a risk less through its official nuclear weapons programme, and more from the nuclear weapons-related trade [facilitated by some of its citizens](#).

Backing down

Most countries around the world still do not have nuclear weapons and are unlikely to want to acquire them. Some countries, such as [South Africa](#), [Brazil](#), [Sweden](#) and [Ukraine](#), have given up on their nuclear armaments programmes. These u-turns did not follow from risk assessments; they were brought about because of intensive and open dialogue.

The Iran deal is not perfect; its proposed inspection regime, for instance, does not fully address the risk of secret procurement, and it will not fundamentally change the geopolitical landscape of the region.

But it has nonetheless established a framework for dialogue with Iran based on good diplomacy and statesmanship, an awareness of history, and an acknowledgement that states can change over time. These things were the key to making the deal, and they remain the key to tackling the risk of nuclear weapons in the future.

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