
International public opinion *vis-à-vis* nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament*

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In his book *The Problem of War and the Roads to Peace*, one of the most authoritative Italian thinkers of the 20th Century – Norberto Bobbio – made a distinction between abstract pacifism, which, giving up hope of limiting war, proposes to eliminate it, and political pacifism, which pursues disarmament. To explain the distinction, Bobbio¹ used a metaphor taken from everyday life: «If you have a cat that scratches, you don't bother getting lost in speculations on the nature of the cat in order to change its instincts: you cut its claws». A realist philosopher, he did not merely distance himself from excessively ideological positions, but continued to pose questions – in the apparent simplicity of his reasoning – about the complexity of the disarmament/security puzzle: «But how will the cat whose claws have been cut defend itself from the child that torments it?».

The question is one for the entire public opinion. We citizens are in fact the owners of the cat, that is, of the functions involved in the issues of peace and war. At least in principle: our aspiration is that it can be so in reality as well.

The objective of these notes is to look analytically at the role of disarmament and non-proliferation in the context of western democracies, with specific reference to one of these societies' most significant resources: public opinion. Inherent in such an approach is an underlying methodological choice: to consider the processes of disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation not in and of themselves but as variables dependent on a political system (which is expected) and on a social system (which is less expected).

* This article is a revised version of the report presented to the international Conference "Can Nuclear Proliferation be stopped?" organized in Rome by Archivio Disarmo on June, 7th, 2007.

¹ NORBERTO BOBBIO, *Il problema della guerra e la via della pace*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1984, p. 76.

1. NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT: THEORY AND PRACTICE

All observers substantially agree on the fact that – with regard to the issues discussed in these notes – the situation today is noticeably worse than it was ten years ago.

In the conventional arms context, the end of the Cold War had bequeathed widespread local conflicts (primarily intra-State), which, however, were dealt with in a sufficiently cooperative climate within the United Nations Security Council. If not peace dividends (a generous aspiration already defeated in 1991 by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait), the new unipolar structure at least guaranteed peace-keeping dividends.

With regard to the strategic context, the final phase of the Cold War had seen nuclear armaments involved in an authentic process of reduction, thanks first to the summits and then to the agreements reached by Reagan and Gorbachev. To tell the truth, what the two super-powers started in the second half of the Eighties was, more than the beginning of a progressive disarmament process, primarily an arrangement to eliminate redundancy. However, this observation must not allow us to forget a crucial fact: the agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union first and then the United States and Russia gave evidence of a renewed willingness for cooperation between the two former enemies and, for the rest of the world, a political signal of undoubted demonstrative effectiveness.

In a collaborative atmosphere that lasted nearly a decade, the Conference for the review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty held in 1995 had significant success, obtaining the unlimited extension of the NPT by the signatory States. The importance of this fact cannot be underestimated by observers, just as it would be good for the nuclear States not to underestimate it. There is not always adequate recognition of the sacrifice made, and still being made, by the non-nuclear States adhering to the treaty having initially signed it and continuing to maintain their support. One of two possibilities is true: either (hypothesis A) possession of military nuclear capacity is not a political resource, that is, not spendable or important for the State in question either in terms of security or in terms of prestige; in this case, however, one fails to understand why this capacity is not spontaneously abandoned, triggering a virtuous process of complete and generalized disarmament of nuclear weapons; or (hypothesis B) military nuclear capacity is a political resource in terms of security and prestige that offers, to those who have it, a deterrent against potential attacks and a higher position in the international hierarchy.

For the have-nots, the lack of such capacity thus constitutes a serious (self) limitation and translates into a true and proper cost. If

this is so, the cost must be compensated. Clearly this compensation could only be political in nature. In reality, this is expressed in the commitment of the nuclear countries to guarantee the security of the non-nuclear countries, preventing the threats that could arrive from non-nuclear States as well as from (intentionally or not) the nuclear States themselves.

The areas within which this can be guaranteed are represented, in the first case, by a process of disarmament that tends towards the banishment of nuclear weapons (also foreseen by the NPT), and other transitory provisions (such as the commitment by States with nuclear weapons not to use them against States that lack them). In the second case the scope is represented by the measures (also foreseen by the NPT) to prevent nuclear proliferation. At this point the question is: are the nuclear States moving in this direction?².

As for disarmament, the situation is anything but satisfying. On the one hand, progress has not been made on agreements whose approval has been long sought. The Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) has still not been ratified by the American Congress. START I will expire in 2009, START II is in crisis, while START III, whose cornerstone was agreed on in Helsinki in 1997 by Clinton and Yeltsin, never got off the ground. The NPT Review Conference in 1995 ended with no decision being made. For the first time, a summit of the heads of State of the United Nations, in 2005, had to completely leave out the section dedicated to disarmament and non-proliferation from its final document because of lack of agreement. In Geneva, consensus has still not been reached on the treaty that prohibits the production of fissile material (FMCT)³.

On the other hand, a slow process of erosion threatens agreements already reached. This is the case of the ABM treaty, which is directly connected to the NPT through the agreements of the Conferences of 1995 and 2000. The unilateral American decision to no longer observe the restrictions contained in the ABM treaty is resulting in the practical consequence of an acceleration of anti-missile systems research, development and experimentation and the projected unfolding

² So far there has been no formalized and generalized unconditioned commitment by those countries possessing nuclear weapons not to use them against non-nuclear countries. Already partial and merely implicit, such a commitment was further resized by the American position of maintaining the right to use nuclear weapons in the case of States that use chemical or bacterial weapons (Source: *Nuclear Posture Review*, 2002).

³ It should be noted that recently there have been timid signs of a revival in which Italy can play a relevant role thanks to its equal distance from both sides on the issue.

in the field of anti-missile “shield” modules⁴. This is the role of the radar that would be placed in the Czech Republic and of the interceptors that would be placed in Poland. These programs are triggering a crisis with Russia, which in reprisal of what it sees as an intrusion and an unjustified threat against its own territory, has threatened the denunciation of the agreements on conventional forces in Europe (CFE). Finally, there is a strong drive to weaponize new areas, such as space, and to integrate nuclear weapons into conventional forces, miniaturizing them and using them for ‘tactical’ tasks, with the effect of dangerously lowering the threshold of their use.

With regard to non-proliferation, the situation is once again uncertain. The international community was nearly unanimous in its consensus on the need to prevent proliferation forty years ago and it is so today. The divisions begin in relation to the means to use to achieve this objective. In the Nineties, the United States formulated the doctrine of counter-proliferation, which foresees the right/duty of the USA to intervene, without limits on the means used (even acting militarily) or on political legitimacy (with or without the authorization of the Security Council) to prevent the acquisition of military nuclear technology by any State or terrorist group. In 1991, the intervention in Iraq by a vast coalition promoted by the United Nations had supplied the confirmation of how Saddam Hussein’s regime was in fact pursuing the development of weapons of mass destruction of the chemical and biological type in contempt of the UN ban. The joint action of the troops under the American command and of the IAEA inspectors made it possible, around 1992, to dismantle the illegal Iraqi WMD installations. From the entire affair, however, the United States government drew the conclusion that surveillance conducted first hand, with its own means and its own methods – rather than that carried out by the UN – was the best solution to stop the proliferation of the WMDs.

Leaving aside the other implications, the doctrine of counter-proliferation has had, as the most macroscopic of its effects, that of sanctioning the unilateralism of the United States. This position, in the second half of the Nineties, was pushed forward and subsequently be-

⁴ The term “shield” can be deceptive. In the field of strategic arms, the destabilizing effects of the ‘defensive’ systems are equal, and at times superior, to those triggered by ‘offensive’ systems since first of all they undermine deterrence. Neutralizing or even only reducing the reactive capacity of the enemy, a defensive system can dangerously encourage an attitude of superiority in a State and/or inferiority in the other. The relative distortions in the perceptions of the balance of force and of security make up one of the most frequent causes of the making of erroneous decisions.

came, during the administration of George W. Bush, the driving force of the USA's foreign and strategic policy.

If these are the problems raised by the theory of counter-proliferation, even more complex are the problems that arise from its practical application. The Iraqi situation is, in its general terms, well known and requires no analysis here. For our purposes it is enough to recall the first of the two reasons initially adopted to explain the need for military intervention to the public opinion of the "coalition of the willing": the possession by Saddam Hussein of weapons of mass destruction capable of threatening international peace and the security of the United States itself⁵. The fact that two official American commissions have brought up the inconsistency of the accusations, confirming what the UN inspections led by Hans Blix⁶ had already verified, struck a serious blow to the credibility and practicability of the counter-proliferation doctrine. In the meantime, the overthrow of the Iraqi regime has emerged as the most plausible of the reasons for American military intervention. It is a fact that, after this, it will be more difficult to justify – to both the American public opinion and that of the world in general – the imposing of sanctions, especially if military in nature, aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation. An ultimatum to a proliferator State to suspend its military nuclear program or face the use of force, as foreseen by Chap. VII of the UN Charter, would be open to the doubt that the real objective is not that of the prohibition of an activity banned by the international community, but rather to achieve regime change in the accused State.

Of whatever intensity – from mere economic sanctions to the use of force – the provisions resulting from the highest authority of the international community, as represented by the Security Council, should avoid allowing political considerations that are foreign to the object of contention to overlay and eventually dominate the legal considerations. From this perspective there is great risk in the non-proliferation doctrine, reasserted in the US National Security Strategy of 2002 and 2006, which says force may be used, even without the authorization of the Security Council, to counter a threat, real or only potential, that involves WMDs. Specifically, the concept according to which this strategy would be «to help make the world not just safer, but better»⁷ is alarming. It is evident that an objective of this type no

⁵ As is well known, the other official reason was the alleged complicity of the Iraqi regime in international terrorism.

⁶ HANS BLIX, *Disarming Iraq*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2004.

⁷ HANS BLIX, "Chairman's Preface" to WMDC, The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, Final report, *Weapons of Terror. Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms*, Stockholm, Sweden 2006, p. 14.

longer has anything to do with the necessary imposition of international legality or with the right of self-defense against an imminent danger, as foreseen by Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. It is rather a political program. Like all political programs, it is characterized by a large amount of subjectivity as to what is good or better for the world. In a context of legitimately plural political options, such a position appears controvertible, losing any idea of cogency that should underlie an extreme measure such as the use of force by the international community⁸.

2. INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC OPINION AND THE USE OF FORCE

Commenting on the demonstrations that in February 2003 saw 100 million people march in the streets, the *New York Times* defined public opinion as «the second world superpower». Traditionally, not only the institutional environments in charge of official policies, but also academics held that the great issues of peace and war were too important to be left to ordinary citizens. Even in the Sixties, the belief of authoritative social scientists like Almond, Converse, Lippmann and others was that such topics were excessively exotic and complex to be understood by the public opinion and that the people in general were too disinterested, emotional and volatile to be able to deal with them. If these ideas may have had some value during the period in which they were expressed, subsequent research has shown that, instead, in the post-industrial society public opinion appears more stable, unbiased and capable of ‘scrutiny’ than was generally believed. Specifically, public opinion has shown itself to be able – in the large picture if not in the details – to formulate sound judgments in response to events and political problems, including those that are international in nature⁹.

Certainly, the possibilities for the men and women in the street to form their own opinions on objectively complicated questions that do not fall under their direct experience must contend with many limita-

⁸ It is interesting to note that, with regard to the final question (international security)/means (use or not of force), the limitations deductively imposed by law find an inductive anchor in the behavioral sciences, which distinguish between the essential character of the primary needs of human beings (that of being “safe”) and the additional character of the secondary needs (such as those of being “better”/enjoying “better” States throughout the world; ABRAHAM MASLOW, *Motivation and personality*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1954.

⁹ PIERANGELO ISERNIA, ZOLTAN JUHÁSZ, HANS RATTINGER, *Foreign Policy and the Rational Public in Comparative Perspective*, in «Journal of Conflict Resolution», 2002, n. 4, pp. 201-224.

tions. For information they depend nearly entirely on the mass media (who in turn depend in part on their own sources and in part, especially for these topics, on governments and other institutional sources). On the other hand, and contrary to the common belief, in western democracies the influence of the means of communication is indeed strong, but not unlimited. The media have nearly uncontested power in establishing the agenda, that is, in deciding *what one must talk about* in the public discourse (and this is obviously crucial). However, they have much less power in deciding *what one must think*, a process that citizens work out for themselves after reading the facts in light of their own convictions and comparing the results to those of the people that make up their reference group.

The situation can therefore be described as a highly explosive blend in which numerous and diverse individual and collective forces of nature are combined, the outcome of which is the opinion of the citizens: something that the governments can try in an initial phase to influence and then later to manipulate and/or evade, but which they are called on, sooner or later, to deal with. The observation of the progress of the opinions of Americans and Europeans in the emblematic case of the war in Iraq is in this sense significant. At the start of the Iraqi crisis, the citizens of the United States expressed a very balanced position, substantially similar to that of the citizens of the European Union: while 20% of those interviewed in June 2002 supported the option of attacking Iraq, even proceeding alone, and 13% said there should be no attack, 65% responded that the attack should occur only with the approval of the UN and the support of allies¹⁰. Seven months later, the intense campaign promoted by the American government to demonstrate the dangerousness of the WMDs possessed by Saddam's regime and his involvement in the attacks of September 11th had brought about a drastic realignment of the American public opinion, which rose to 47-49% in favor of intervention (Zolby International, January 2003) and then to 80% during the intervention (ABC-Washington Post/TNS, April 2003). In addition to the insistent propaganda of the government, this inversion of the trend was due to structural mechanisms of the American public opinion that were already known and had been studied, such as the solid faith in the political institutions (particularly in the figure of the President) and the tendency to regroup in situations of emergency such as war («rally round

¹⁰ The average of six European countries (France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland) gave values that came to, respectively, 10%, 26% and 60%. Source: The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations – The German Marshall Fund of the United States (CCFR-GMFUS).

the flag»). Since then, however, it has been possible to foresee that, where the declarations of the government were revealed to be untrue, and the promises of a rapid and positive outcome of the war to be false, the American public opinion would withdraw its consent to a very large extent¹¹.

The overall ‘wisdom’ of public opinion (especially where, as in representative democracies, it can unfold freely) is also capable, if offered the opportunity, of finding its way on the difficult roads of non-proliferation and disarmament.

As noted by Hans Blix¹², in recent years public opinion has given little attention to the issues of disarmament and arms control, being polarized as it is by the emergency of terrorism and the preventive and counter measures it has inspired. It is unfortunately true that the international treaties have not been (nor could they have been) effective in preventing the catastrophe of September 11th, but it is at the same time true that, if the climate is – as we find it in the world today – one of war, speaking of disarmament becomes more and more difficult.

In the opinion of this writer, the necessary attention and the correct political investment that are to be dedicated to the terroristic threat should not exclude similar attention and investment being given to the issues of disarmament. Rather, if both of these areas are included in the agendas on the containment of violence in international relations, they can co-exist, becoming integrated where – as in the case of the threat of use of nuclear arms and technology by a terrorist group – they can even be materially superimposed.

3. INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC OPINION AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

In contemporary society there are many and diverse phenomena that bring about the perception of insecurity in the public opinion. The objective of substituting insecurity with security may be achieved only by understanding the nature of the phenomena that affect the safety of a society and its perception by the public opinion. Analyzing the phenomena which make up the sources of both real and perceived insecurity, it emerges that they may be divided into three categories: *dangers*, *risks* and *threats* – in relation to where each category is lo-

¹¹ It may be opportune to note that currently the consent of the American public opinion regarding the intervention in Iraq has reached an all-time low: 58% of those interviewed believe that the United States made an error in intervening militarily (USA Today – Gallup, May 2007) and 72% disapprove of Bush’s management of the situation in Iraq (CBS News – New York Times, May 2007).

¹² BLIX, “Chairman’s Preface” to WMDC, cit..

cated along a *continuum* of intentionality/non-intentionality¹³. At one extreme there is the zero intentionality of danger, which manifests itself in the form of a natural event (earthquake, tsunami, volcanic eruption, etc.). At the opposite extreme there is the full intentionality of a threat, which is manifested in the form of hostile action (military attack, terrorist attack). In the middle there is risk, which is the possible damage that originates from an intention that is positive rather than negative¹⁴. The distinction is not merely academic, since the definition of any damage from which we must defend ourselves produces the priorities and the tools of defense that we decide to make ready¹⁵.

The *Difebarometro* opinion survey on security matters we carried out in May 2007 shows that international terrorism and global warming – respectively a threat and a risk – are the two principal reasons for alarm according to Italian public opinion. It is significant that in third place we find the spread of nuclear weapons in new countries, held to be very important by 2/3 of respondents. Not negligible, but of lesser proportions (47.6%) is the opinion of those who judge as very important the lack of disarmament by the nuclear powers.

Analyzing the *Difebarometro* data we find the confirmation of already known tendencies as well as the appearance of new ones. Among those confirmed we find, for example, in a framework of generalized opposition to the use of force, a direct correlation between this position and educational background, with the more educated also being the most opposed to military intervention. Among the unexpected results, instead, we see a relatively greater propensity towards military intervention in younger people (18-34 years old) compared to the two successive age groups. The relatively lower sensitivity towards the nuclear question in all of its aspects (non-proliferation, disarmament), seen among young people with respect to the central age group and even more with respect to the elderly respondents, is also a cause for reflection.

¹³ FABRIZIO BATTISTELLI, *Gli italiani e la guerra. Tra senso di insicurezza e terrorismo internazionale*, Roma, Carocci, 2004.

¹⁴ ULRICH BECK, *Risk society: towards a new modernity*, London, Sage, 1992. Ulrich Beck showed that risk – meaning the critical consequence of choices that are in themselves functionally oriented (i.e. pollution deriving from industrialization, or accidents such as Chernobyl, etc.) – represents the characterizing condition of the ‘second modernity’.

¹⁵ In the preceding analyses of public opinion in Europe and in the United States we showed how both sides of the Atlantic were very familiar with the threats of terrorism and the proliferation of WMDs; the principal difference between Europeans and Americans is that the former rank a risk such as global warming in third place, while for the latter it is only in eighth place (CCFR-GMFUS *Worldviews* 2000).

It is clear that, since the end of the bipolar world, there has been a change in both the agenda of the questions approved as being important and the framework in which they are treated by the media and in public discourse. The existence of vast and sophisticated nuclear arsenals and the risk/threat of new members knocking on the door of the nuclear club do not seem to cause the same alarm in recent generations as nuclear weapons triggered, and continue to trigger, in the preceding generations, who remember the Cold War and the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. At the same time, the reference framework has also changed. The emergence in the Nineties of intra-State conflicts – of nationalistic, ethnic or religious origins – and in the current decade of fundamentalist terrorism have caused a part of the public opinion, that of young people, to become accustomed to seeing military responses as normal.

Public opinion would instinctively tend, in Europe as in the United States, towards an attitude that we may define as reasonable political pacifism. This attitude, however, requires content, an area in which the role of the public institutions and the means of information is crucial. It is therefore indispensable that western public opinion not only is not left out of the debate on the issues of disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation but, on the contrary, is truly involved, with all the useful information and analyses provided for an open public discussion that is free, unprejudiced and based on the facts.

At little less than twenty years from the end of the Cold War, the world is still not free of conflicts, and it does not appear to become so in the immediate future. The task of the international community is, at the very least, to manage them with the maximum impartiality and with as little violence as possible. Back in the era of two superpowers possessed of strategic arms (each capable, that is, of destroying the territory of the other), the bipolar world was founded on an equilibrium that was known as the “balance of terror”. Today the terror of an aggressive use of nuclear weapons by a State or a non-State group has not been filed away at all, nor has it been made less remote by the non-equilibrated (asymmetric) nature of today’s conflicts.

If this is true for the threats of war, it is in part also true for the processes of peace, among which an important place is occupied by nuclear disarmament. In absence of partners of the same level «the United States is clearly less interested in global approaches and treaty making than it was in the Cold War era»¹⁶.

¹⁶ WMDC, The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, Final report, *Weapons of Terror. Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2006, p.25.

In the current international scene there would not seem to be one or more actors capable of balancing the United States strategically. But what about the future? Before others (Russia? China?) step in to create a new cold war, we need a “second superpower”, one without nuclear weapons, or any other types of weapons, that is capable, however, of making itself heard. We believe that superpower could indeed be the public opinion.

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