CHAPTER 11

Wrestling with Parity

The Nuclear Revolution Revisited

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WHAT WOULD BE THE CONSEQUENCES OF, and the appropriate response to, nuclear parity between the Cold War superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States? American policymakers and strategists had anticipated and worried about this development since the Soviet Union detonated its first nuclear device on August 29, 1949. There had been much debate during the 1950s and 1960s about when the moment of parity would arrive, but by the 1970s its existence was accepted. The effects and reaction to this new condition, however, were widely disputed.

Intense debate over the meaning and consequences of, and the appropriate response to, nuclear parity with the Soviet Union dominated American strategic discourse throughout the 1970s. The answers to these questions drove some of the most important foreign and military policies of the decade, from arms control negotiations to alliance relations to multibillion-dollar weapon systems deployments. The ensuing, increasingly bitter disputes over these issues helped shape and in many ways calcify domestic political divisions in the United States, bringing a final end to the remnants of the so-called Cold War consensus that had not already been sacrificed in the quagmire of Southeast Asia.

In retrospect these disagreements seem esoteric and even bizarre. Dig a little deeper, however, and it becomes clear that these debates had important meanings and consequences that went beyond nuclear strategy. Arguments that appeared to focus on obscure technical terms such as "throw weight" and "single shot kill probability" often masked divergent

views of international relations and the place of the United States in global politics during the Cold War. In other words, competing visions for America's role in the world, differing interpretations of the nature of the international system, and contested metrics for what constituted power and influence in world affairs were at stake in the fight over nuclear parity.

This essay identifies three different responses to nuclear parity that emerged during the 1970s. The best-known school of thought accepted and even embraced nuclear parity. Mutual vulnerability, it was argued, prevented war and ensured "strategic stability" by guaranteeing that a first strike by either side would be suicidal, as it risked a devastating response from the surviving forces of the adversary. While variations of this worldview existed, it made achieving arms control with the Soviet Union a priority and linked the military balance to what proponents saw as a promising "détente" between the superpowers. The second response rejected the inevitability and desirability of parity and doubted the concept of strategic stability. Critics from what might be called the "nuclear superiority" school ranged from those who believed that parity with the Soviets undermined the ability of the United States to fulfill its commitments to defend its allies, to those who thought a nuclear war could be fought and won. As a whole, this group was uncomfortable with the moral and strategic consequences of parity and détente with the Soviet Union. Proponents of these two worldviews engaged in a passionate and often bitter political struggle over the future of U.S. nuclear doctrine, military procurement, and grand strategy.

The third response—or set of responses—could not have been more different. From a variety of sources and in a variety of ways, nuclear weapons came to be seen in many circles as far less relevant to international politics than either the mutual vulnerability–strategic stability or nuclear superiority school contended. These responses ran the gamut from nuclear abolitionism to a focus on what we now call soft power, and had as many differences as similarities. All of these views, however, were connected by the belief that nuclear deterrence was not the cornerstone of international relations, and that the great shifts in world politics were driven by fundamental changes that went beyond the nuclear revolution. While this set of ideas was diffuse and had no obvious policy champion during the 1970s, these nascent ideas and forces would come to define the post–Cold War era of globalization we live in today.

A Church Divided: Mutual Vulnerability versus Nuclear Superiority

From the first atomic detonation, strategists wrestled with the implications that nuclear weapons presented for statecraft and military competition. Among these analysts within the United States there were many disagreements, but in essence the debate revolved around a basic question: Did these fearsome weapons have any purpose other than to deter an adversary from attacking you (or your friends)? While more traditional thinkers accepted the profound implications of nuclear weapons, they did not believe it possible or wise to preclude the possibility that they might be used, and sought to develop strategies that could help the United States prevail, or at least limit the damage, should deterrence fail. Naturally this entailed having more and better weapons than the Soviet Union. A different group—one that came to be seen as more intellectually sophisticated and influential in policy circles—argued vehemently that nuclear weapons had no utility beyond deterring others from a nuclear attack, and that strategies that sought to accomplish more were foolish and often dangerous. Weapons and strategies that provided for stability, not superiority, were the goal.

These debates and discussions—which began in universities and think tanks such as RAND in the 1950s before moving to more public forums in the 1960s and 1970s—are among the best chronicled in modern strategic and political history.[1] Most accounts portray a remarkable and rare time when wise and important policymakers implemented the ideas produced by cutting-edge intellectuals. There is reason to question, however, how good these ideas were and, more important, how influential they were in the making of policy.[2] And while advocates on each side spoke from the platform of "social science," assuming their ideas were generalizable over space and time, neither the nuclear superiority–damage limitation nor the mutual vulnerability–strategic stability view found much acceptance outside the United States. Another unusual feature was that the mutual vulnerability–strategic stability school appeared to triumph in the intellectual debate—and make real headway in policy circles—at the moment of greatest American nuclear strength. Despite constant public fears during the first two decades of the atomic era that Russia would catch up with and surpass America in the number of weapons, bombers, or missiles, by

the time of the greatest nuclear tension—Berlin and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1961–62—the United States, by many measures, possessed significant nuclear superiority.

What did it actually mean to have nuclear superiority, however, and what if anything did it translate into in world politics? The question exposed the key divide within the strategy community in the United States. Many American (as opposed to Soviet) veterans of the superpower standoff concluded that U.S. nuclear superiority had little or no influence on the outcome and by itself was dangerous. Looking back on the crisis years, former national security adviser McGeorge Bundy claimed: "It is sometimes argued that in the past nuclear superiority . . . has had a decisive influence on events. I find this a very doubtful proposition."[3] One of the most important participants in the nuclear standoff, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, advocated a U.S. defense policy in which mutual vulnerability and strategic stability were the most important ends of American grand strategy. This led to cancellations of nuclear delivery systems and, after years of increases, a ceiling on strategic nuclear delivery vehicles. Combined with a massive surge in Soviet strategic nuclear weapons—an increase largely unforeseen by analysts and U.S. intelligence agencies—the nuclear superiority of the early 1960s gave way to parity by the end of the decade.

Oddly, this dramatic shift in the balance of military power was not lamented. In fact, within mainstream policy circles there was a strong consensus that parity was inevitable, that nuclear superiority was useless, and that mutual vulnerability should be embraced. Writing in early 1971, Paul Warnke and Leslie Gelb summed up the conventional wisdom: "The United States and the Soviet Union are now in a constellation of parity, both sides possessing a secure second strike capability. . . . As long as neither pursues an unreachable quest for 'superiority' in the form of knockout first strike capability, there will be continued strategic stability."[4] In what must have been a first in the history of great power politics, the analysts of the leading adversary welcomed the passing of its quantitative advantage, secure in the belief that both sides would see the benefits of nuclear equality.

And why would either side reach for this superiority? To the mutual vulnerability–strategic stability school, the logic of parity was less a policy choice than an inescapable fact of international political life. This attitude is borne out in the title of a chapter—"MAD Is a Fact, Not a Policy"—in

Robert Jervis's influential book on the nuclear revolution.[5] Any attempt to return to a mythical world of superiority was pointless. As William Foster, who directed the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency throughout the 1960s, asserted, "Whatever index of strategic nuclear power is used, it would seem rather fruitless for either side to claim superiority, when, no matter what it does, the other side will still have the capability to inflict unacceptable damage."[6]

This view—that mutual vulnerability was a fact of life that could not be overcome—exposed a troubling paradox. If seeking superiority was "fruitless," it would seem that there was little anyone could or should do to affect the nuclear balance. Wouldn't the best idea be to let nature—in this case the laws of international politics—take its course? This was not, however, the policy recommendation of the mutual vulnerability–strategic stability school. While the efforts to overcome mutual vulnerability were bound to fail, they were also destabilizing. As Alton Frye remarked: "One of those realities is that the attempt by either side to alter the stability of deterrence by overcoming its own vulnerabilities is bound to be dangerous. A unilateral quest for escape from the paradox of deterrence is a reckless and counterproductive gesture calculated only to jeopardize both countries' security."[7] In other words, strategic behavior that once was considered normal and expected—trying to amass more usable firepower than your enemy—was now to be avoided at all costs.

This paradox got to the heart of how proponents of the mutual vulnerability–strategic stability school understood the world. To their mind, international politics was driven by what strategists called the security dilemma. In a dangerous world, states did what they could to protect themselves. Adversaries, however, could easily misunderstand these defensive measures. A strategy or weapon system deployed to protect a country could be seen as aggressive and offense-oriented by a nervous neighbor. The threatened nation would undertake its own defensive countermeasures that could be similarly misperceived. In other words, in a world where states did not trust one another, defensive efforts could spiral into an unwanted arms race or even a conflict.[8]

This dangerous dynamic was heightened in a world of nuclear weapons, where the side that launched weapons first would have tremendous advantages, particularly if it was not vulnerable to a devastating second strike. Things could not be allowed to develop "naturally"; instead policymakers had to intervene to retard or halt the security dilemma process. Only mu-

tually negotiated arms control that maintained each side's vulnerability could slow the arms race and reduce instability. The mutual vulnerability school's recommendations were a strange brew of realism and international law, two approaches not typically associated with each other. The world was a scary, unpredictable place, but instead of nations' seeking as much military power as possible, self-restraint and treaties could make the world safer.

This view of parity and mutual vulnerability engendered a fierce resistance from a vocal and influential minority. For them the idea of self-restraint in an uncertain world was dangerous and even bizarre. Targeting civilian populations seemed immoral. Fred Ikle charged that the "jargon of American strategic analysis works like a narcotic. . . . [I]t blinds us to the fact that our method of preventing nuclear war rests on a form of warfare universally condemned since the Dark Ages—the mass killing of hostages."[9] The notion of constructing a strategy that had no concept of victory—only deterrence—seemed beyond the pale for many who viewed nuclear weapons through a traditional political-military lens. Critics such as Paul Nitze understood the arguments about parity but were dismayed by the willingness of the mutual vulnerability crowd to embrace arms control as an end in itself, naïve to the possibility that the Soviets would exploit any advantage. "There is every prospect," declared Nitze, "that under the terms of the SALT agreements the Soviet Union will continue to pursue a nuclear superiority that is not merely quantitative but designed to produce a theoretical war-winning capability."[10] Even if the agreements were fair, could the Soviets be trusted to keep their word?

The sharpest criticism came from those who believed that the Soviet Union simply did not buy the logic behind mutual vulnerability and strategic stability. Richard Pipes argued that "there is something innately destabilizing in the very fact that we consider nuclear war unfeasible and suicidal for both [sides], and our chief adversary views it as feasible and winnable for himself."[11] Some went even further, arguing that arms control gave away the United States' greatest advantage: a powerful economy and a strong technological base that would allow it to win an arms race with the Soviets. As Colin Gray put it: "The instability arguments that are leveled against those who urge an American response (functionally) in kind are somewhat fragile. . . . [T]here is good reason to believe that the Soviet Union would be profoundly discouraged by the prospect of having

to wage an arms competition against an American opponent no longer severely inhibited by its long-familiar stability theory."[12]

Did the nuclear superiority–damage limitation school offer ideas and policies that were any more logical and appealing? The ideas of the more extreme critics of mutual vulnerability—those who argued that one had to think about fighting and winning a nuclear war—seemed unsound and dangerous. And while it is easy to assume in retrospect that arms racing exposed weaknesses in the Soviet system, it was hard for anyone looking at the American economic performance during the 1970s to think that the United States had the wherewithal to excel in such a competition. The arguments that superiority was needed to "limit damage" in any nuclear exchange were hardly more convincing. Was it wise or even rational for the United States to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on complex, exotic nuclear systems to reduce, at best, American fatalities in a nuclear exchange to, say, 30 to 40 million from over 100 million?

The nuclear superiority arguments were driven, one suspects, more by political than technical arguments; namely, by a deep unease with the so-called détente that was associated with an acceptance of parity and support for arms control. Was the Soviet Union a status quo, responsible power willing to obey international law and adopt Western norms? Or was it an aggressive, authoritarian state interested in world revolution and willing to engage in nuclear diplomacy simply to dupe naïve American policy elites? And even if the Soviets were responsible and interested in maintaining the status quo, was the stability of détente, parity, and arms control worth ratifying a division of the world, and in particular Europe, between free and unfree? Did the United States—to many an exceptional nation and a beacon to the world—have a moral if not a military responsibility to expand freedom and fight tyranny? These arguments found mixed domestic support within the United States. Polls showed backing for both arms control and increases in military expenditures, support for détente and yet unease with Soviet behavior on the world stage. Members of the nuclear superiority school displayed similar inconsistency and even incoherence, as if some of the more important advocates were unsure what to believe. Policymakers such as Henry Kissinger and Paul Nitze switched sides more than once.

Was it possible that the mutual vulnerability–strategic stability crowd underestimated the political if not military utility of nuclear superiority?[13]

In the years following the showdown, American participants in the Cuban Missile Crisis argued that it was the vast conventional edge and not the nuclear superiority of the United States that determined the outcome.[14] If true, shouldn't the same logic have applied to West Berlin, where NATO and in particular the United States resisted Soviet ultimatums and pressure despite an insurmountable inferiority in conventional forces? There is at least some reason to think that nuclear superiority played some role.[15] Even if there was no *military* utility in nuclear superiority, there was certainly a *political* and even a *psychological* advantage. President Richard Nixon, for example, lamented the loss of nuclear superiority and its perceived geopolitical advantages, even as his official doctrine accepted parity and his administration pursued strategic arms control.[16] And while nuclear equality may have been enough to ensure that an adversary would not attack you, was it enough to guarantee that the same adversary would not attack your friends? In other words, could the United States "extend" deterrence to its friends and allies in an age of parity?

This pointed to a second flaw. The mutual vulnerability–strategic stability school, in its obsession with the U.S.-Soviet strategic arms rivalry, paid very little attention to nuclear dynamics outside of the superpower rivalry. Their focus was on vertical, not horizontal, arms races, and so they tended to overlook the arguably bigger long-term threat to global security, the increasing pressures of nuclear proliferation. This lack of awareness manifested itself in two ways. First, by accepting parity they risked "decoupling" the nuclear forces of the United States from the security of its non-nuclear allies, tempting them toward acquiring their own atomic weapons. In retrospect it is striking how some members of the mutual vulnerability–strategic stability school failed to appreciate the extent to which their positions—on issues ranging from arms control to no first use, specific programs such as the neutron bomb, Pershing II missiles, and even missile defense—ignored or discounted the security concerns of non-nuclear allies such as West Germany and Japan.

There was an even larger proliferation issue. Advocates of strategic stability rarely realized that their arguments endorsed the virtues of nuclear weapons. If nuclear weapons stabilized relations between the superpowers and prevented war, why wouldn't they do the same thing for other countries and regions? Is it any wonder that while the 1970s witnessed the greatest strides in vertical arms control, proliferation worries increased. Israel, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan, and South

Korea, among others, flirted and in some cases moved forward with nuclear weapons programs.

The third weakness in the mutual vulnerability–strategic stability school involved its understanding of what factors drove international politics. For most strategists the bipolar military competition was the ultimate example of how an uncontrolled arms race, driven by the security dilemma, could lead to instability and, without arms control, potentially to war. If the nuclear arms race could be controlled or even suspended, international politics would stabilize and the threat of global conflagration would dissipate.

Arguing that the Cold War was a product of the security dilemma, however, drained it of its political and even ideological or moral content. Would the United States and Soviet Union have avoided bitter disputes over important matters, such as the military and political status of Germany, in a world of mutual vulnerability and arms control? Would there have been no ideological competition? By focusing almost exclusively on the interaction between rival military factors, the mutual vulnerability framework tended to underplay the importance of geopolitics, ideology, and diplomacy. In fact it is difficult to find a clear-cut case of a modern war unambiguously caused by the security dilemma or an arms race.[17]

Arguably the most authoritative study on the question—a thousand-plus-page top secret scholarly study commissioned by Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger—revealed that the military competition between the superpowers was not driven by the security dilemma: "The facts will not support the proposition that either the Soviet Union or the United States developed strategic forces only in direct immediate access to each other."[18] There were other, more rational reasons for each side to increase its numbers of nuclear weapons: "Surges in strategic force deployments sprang from interaction between a scientific community producing basic technical developments and political leaders affected by immediate crisis events."[19] Furthermore, acquiring and deploying arms often acted as an effective way to signal unhappiness or aggressive intent between adversaries. By limiting this signaling device, arms control could increase the possibilities of misperception.

Looking back at the pages of the leading American academic and policy journals during the 1970s, one would think that these debates surrounding nuclear arms control and strategy were the pivot on which the future of world politics turned. In fact we now know that global order during the 1970s was driven by complex and fundamental changes in interna-

tional relations that may have included but certainly went well beyond the choices of either mutual vulnerability or nuclear superiority. Were there also reactions to nuclear parity that went beyond the narrow perspective of the leading strategists?

Beyond Deterrence?

A third response to the nuclear equality between the Soviet Union and the United States emerged from diverse sources and with few champions within the strategic studies community. In fact to label it a "response" to parity, similar to mutual vulnerability and nuclear superiority, is misleading. It is perhaps better described as a sensibility, animated by the notion that that there was something not quite right about the debate within the strategy community. In other words, the rift in the strategy "church" seemed somewhat unreal and disconnected from how the world actually worked. The four strands of this sensibility—nuclear abolitionism, the rise of a nuclear taboo, the notion that major war was obsolete, and the preference for other, "softer" forms of power—shared a common trait: a skepticism that nuclear deterrence and arms control would be the cornerstone of international politics in the decades to follow. Often disregarded by contemporaries during the 1970s, these responses to the emergence of nuclear parity may, in the long run, have provided a better understanding of the profound transformation of international relations in the decades since then than the more traditional insights of the strategy community.

Nuclear Abolitionism

The nuclear age did not just produce weapons; it also produced the world's largest grassroots transnational peace movement, fostered by nongovernmental organizations. While strategies differed among the myriad groups, they shared a common belief—that eliminating nuclear weapons from the planet, not strengthening nuclear deterrence, was the key to global peace and stability.

Because their views were so much at odds with the thinking of most strategists and mainstream scholars, the influence of abolitionism on nuclear history has been understated. Worldwide pressure from nuclear abolitionists played a key role in any number of nuclear and arms control policies, from the crafting of the partial test-ban treaty to the decision not to

deploy the "neutron bomb." It is important to note, however, that the view that there was something problematic about basing world peace on nuclear deterrence was not just held by so-called "peaceniks." Unlike some of their national security staff and cabinet officers, most presidents during the postwar period (with the possible exception of Nixon) felt a deep ambivalence about nuclear weapons. During the 1976 presidential campaign Jimmy Carter "proclaimed a goal of abolishing nuclear weapons, albeit one step at a time," and as early as January 26, 1977, he informed Brezhnev, "My solid objective is to liquidate nuclear weapons completely."[20] More surprisingly (and controversially), there may have been abolitionist tendencies in Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan. According to Paul Lettow, "Reagan's nuclear abolitionism, which grew out of his deeply rooted personal beliefs and religious views, resulted in some of the most significant—and least understood—aspects of his presidency." Even Reagan's call for arms increases were aimed at a belief, which he had enunciated since the early 1960s, that "the aim of his arms buildup was to attain deep cuts in nuclear weapons."[21]

Nuclear abolitionism found broader public support than many other peace movements because of a widespread abhorrence at the effects of atomic weapons and the sense that nuclear deterrence was a problematic solution at best. The absurdity of mutual vulnerability—that idea that security depended on leaving oneself open to destruction—was matched by skepticism about spending tens of billions of dollars on additional weapons systems which would only improve security at the margins, if at all. The emergence of parity highlighted long-standing fears and concerns about the nuclear age; if these weapons no longer had any conceivable political or military use, perhaps it was time to purge them from the planet.

Nuclear Taboo

A related critique of the mutual vulnerability and nuclear superiority responses to parity is that deterrence cannot by itself explain the nonuse of nuclear weapons after they were first deployed by the United States against Japan in August 1945. For one thing, the United States did not use nuclear weapons against its adversaries after the Second World War. It possessed a nuclear monopoly over the Soviets during the Berlin blockade but abstained. It enjoyed a nuclear superiority throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, an edge that by some estimates gave the United

States a first-strike capability. And after the attack on Japan, neither the United States nor any other nuclear power used its weapons against non-nuclear adversaries. This was not due to a lack of opportunity or support for such actions at the highest policy levels. During the bloody Korean War, talk on the American side of using nuclear weapons produced concern and even outrage at home and abroad, and the 1953 armistice was signed before such threats could be carried out. During the Vietnam War the United States at times considered but eventually turned away from using nuclear weapons, despite the military advantages it could have brought.

Nina Tannenwald has argued that moral repugnance among the wider public at the thought of using nuclear weapons restrained policymakers in ways that supplemented and even went beyond deterrence.[22] This emerging taboo against using nuclear weapons ever again arguably crystallized in the age of nuclear parity, when the taboo and the notion of mutual vulnerability came together to make nuclear use among "civilized" nations inconceivable. Parity only highlighted the absurdity of any responsible leader advocating the use of these weapons.

Obsolescence of War

War, according to the scholar John Mueller, is nothing more than an idea.[23] And like all ideas it is created in a cultural, political, and sociological context that can change over time. During the second part of the twentieth century, the idea of great power war was increasingly seen in Europe and other parts of the developed world as obsolete. Similar to dueling and slavery a century earlier, an institution or practice that was viewed as beneficial and important increasingly came to be seen as anachronistic and even repulsive. In this explanation it was not nuclear weapons that kept the peace; the peace would have been maintained even in a non-nuclear world. Furthermore, the status and prestige previously accorded to war were now granted to economic success.

According to this analysis, the endless divisive debates over the minutiae of arms control negotiations were a waste of time. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union had the stomach for a conventional war with each other, to say nothing of a nuclear war. While these ideological rivals might trade insults and fight limited proxy wars in the developed world, by the 1970s there was almost no conceivable scenario that might lead to a

nuclear exchange. There was simply nothing to be gained from great power war; the real action in international politics was now elsewhere.

The Rise of Globalization

The fourth response was the most inchoate and least noticed, and it received the least policy exposure during the 1970s. In the long run, however, it had the most significant consequences for U.S. global policy. Coinciding with the emergence of parity—a condition that rendered nuclear weapons militarily useless and politically impotent—was the rise of a new international system, with new actors, new norms, and, most important, new metrics for power. According to this view of the world, ideas, innovation, technology, and culture were more likely to shape world politics than arms control agreements or the nuclear balance between the superpowers. What happened in Wall Street, Hollywood, Silicon Valley, or even Napa Valley was as important, and sometimes even more important to America's position in the world than the decisions made in Washington, D.C. What Joseph Nye termed "soft power," in other words, was more likely than nuclear armaments to determine the outcome of the struggle with the Soviet Union.

The increasing reach of global capital markets, the spread of popular culture via Hollywood, the popularity of consumer-oriented capitalism, and in particular the influence of innovation and new technology were just some of the "soft power" phenomena that transformed the world economy after the 1970s, and with it the political landscape. These phenomena, more than nuclear weapons, were game changers for states looking to improve their global political position. Nations that had flirted with nuclear weapons in the past—such as Taiwan, South Korea, Brazil, Argentina, and Indonesia—instead focused on spurring economic growth and integrating into the world economy. Under the new metrics of power, demonstrating the economic dynamism of a "Pacific Tiger," for example, counted for a lot more than simply possessing a weapon that translated into little usable power on the world stage.

The much-anticipated arrival of nuclear parity between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1970s unleashed a furious and often vitriolic debate over American grand strategy during the Cold War. The

battlegrounds for these fights seem esoteric and strange from our current perspective, often dominated by technical debates over specific weapon systems. Should the Soviet Backfire fighter-bomber be classified as a tactical or strategic weapon? Were cruise missiles fired from airplanes qualitatively different from those fired from the sea or ground? Was the U.S. government and its command and control facilities vulnerable to a decapitating first strike? Should hundreds of billions of dollars be spent on strategic nuclear weapons, not to achieve superiority but to enhance the stability of deterrence? Would strategic defenses undermine this stability even if there were some question whether they would work? Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this period is that so much of the time and intellectual energy of some of our most esteemed policymakers and strategists were consumed by these questions.

It is not even clear that these were the most important nuclear policy issues at the time. As nuclear parity was achieved and then institutionalized by a remarkable series of arms control treaties between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1970s, the decade witnessed increasing pressure on the global nonproliferation regime. India detonated a "peaceful" nuclear device, and Pakistan responded with a crash program that also spawned A. Q. Khan's black market in nuclear technology. Iran and Iraq both flirted with weapons programs, as did many others, including Argentina, Brazil, South and North Korea, and Taiwan. It is not that this issue, which dominates our current policy landscape, received no policy or scholarly attention at all. It is striking, however, how much more attention was paid to strategic arms issues involving the United States and the Soviet Union.

What, then, are we to make of the reactions to nuclear parity? These debates are less interesting for their assessments of specific questions than for what they say about how leading thinkers and statesmen thought about the way the world worked and what America's role in it should be. The mutual vulnerability school argued that the nuclear revolution had fundamentally altered the laws of great power politics and statecraft. Unlike in the past, the state could no longer depend on its most powerful and innovative weapons to pursue its goals in the world. The new landscape of international relations demanded a new response: self-restraint, respect for the interests of your adversaries, and devotion to international treaties. This viewpoint sought to freeze the status quo, both militarily and politically, in order to avoid the risks of nuclear war. Most radically, the sta-

bility of the new system demanded accepting and even embracing the possibility of catastrophic destruction. This set of ideas became so enmeshed in the conventional wisdom that it is easy to forget how novel and counterintuitive this framework for understanding world politics actually was.

The superiority school did not dispute that the nuclear revolution had changed international politics in important ways. In its proponents' view, however, this did not include suspending the laws of world politics or what many saw as a moral, political, and ideological duty to challenge the Soviet Union. While many intellectuals dismissed this view, there is a strong argument to be made that policymakers on both sides of the rivalry never abandoned their search for nuclear primacy.

Who was right? This question turns upon what brought about the peaceful end of the Cold War, largely to the advantage of the United States. The mutual vulnerability school argues that the stability of deterrence allowed Gorbachev's Soviet Union to transform itself without fear that the United States could militarily exploit the situation. The nuclear superiority school argues that the arms race exposed weaknesses in the Soviet economy that eventually bankrupted the Soviet empire. Both views have some merit, but both may have missed the larger, more profound changes in international politics that have marked the decades since the 1970s.

The third set of responses—the idea that tectonic forces beyond nuclear deterrence were shaping the global order—may be the most compelling. Consider behavior in the nuclear field. First, despite the pressures on the nonproliferation regime during the 1970s, what is striking is how few eligible states developed nuclear weapons. And those that did eschewed either local nuclear superiority or even secure second-strike strategies. Several embraced minimal deterrence, believing that simply possessing a few nuclear weapons would be enough to keep their adversaries from attacking. Even China and India, which could build far larger and more sophisticated nuclear forces if they chose to, maintain relatively small capabilities and have not been drawn into either regional nuclear arms races or a nuclear arms race with the United States. Reflect upon how strategists from the 1970s would view the recent embrace by distinguished policymakers of nuclear abolitionism—an idea that was considered on the fringe in polite mutual vulnerability and nuclear superiority circles.[24]

Understanding the responses to nuclear parity within the United States

during the 1970s is important for more than just academic purposes. Advocates and disciples of both the mutual vulnerability and nuclear superiority schools continue to play a large, even dominating role in recent debates over U.S. global policy. It is important to recognize the influence the debates over parity and deterrence had on their grand strategies and worldviews. It is even more important to recognize that there were other frameworks within which to analyze the emergence of parity, views that may have been more effective at explaining the great changes that began to transform global politics during the 1970s and shape our world today.