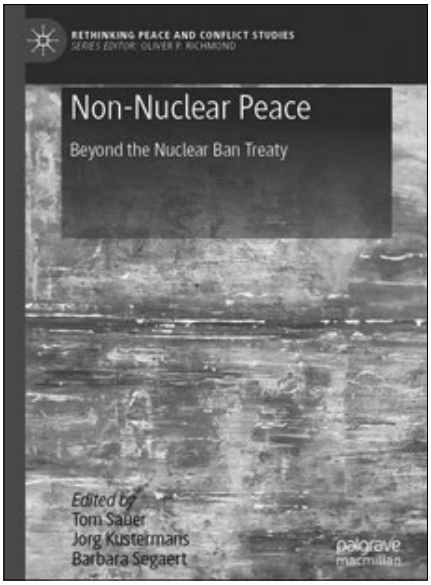
Tom Sauer, Jorg Kustermans and Barbara Segaert (eds.): Non-Nuclear Peace: Beyond the Nuclear Ban Treaty

Reviewed by Jason Adolph



In an era marked by renewed geopolitical and nuclear tensions, reaching a world free of nuclear weapons regained significance. What institutions, policies, and discursive strategies are necessary to convince advocates of nuclear deterrence to leave nuclear weapons behind? This is the question explored in *Non-Nuclear Peace: Beyond the Nuclear Ban Treaty* (2020). For Tom Sauer – a professor in international politics – Jorg Kustermans – a professor of international relations – and Barbara Segaert – a scientific coordinator – the objective of "non-nuclear peace is to prevent a nuclear war" (2). The concept challenges nuclear deterrence theories. It transcends mere disarmament and calls for reimagining the global security landscape.

The collection addresses various themes in nuclear peace research, including nuclear deterrence, non-proliferation, the humanitarian debate, and disarmament. The eight contributors, from fields including international relations, political science, and history, join the editors in this interdisciplinary effort to move beyond entrenched debates about nuclear weapons. The goal is to envision a peaceful international order without the "fear of nuclear war" (2).

The volume is structured around three thematic sections. The first part examines criticisms and commendations of nuclear deterrence and proliferation. The second part discusses how to drive normative change to delegitimise nuclear weapons through discursive strategies. The final section explores the institutions and norms that should be established to achieve a nuclear weapons-free world.

In Chapter 1, the editors outline the book's conceptual framework. The volume builds on the tradition of nuclear pacifism. They oppose nuclear weapons on ethical grounds and highlight the disproportionate risks these weapons pose in relation to their stabilising effects. They define non-nuclear peace as a concept that "takes issue with the logic of nuclear deterrence and that envisions a peace order attuned to the exigencies of a post-nuclear world" (2). This corresponds to a world free from the fear of nuclear war. Recognising the changing international circumstances and the conclusion of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the editors want to provide new intellectual input on how such a world might be realised.

Expanding on this theoretical groundwork, Casper Sylvest, in Chapter 2, conducts a historical analysis of how nuclear weapons were conceptualised during the early nuclear age. He argues that, from their onset, nuclear weapons sparked a debate between those who viewed them as essential for security and those who condemned them on moral and humanitarian grounds. Sylvest illustrates this duality by recounting four areas of contestation that have shaped nuclear thinking: the (im)morality of nuclear weapons, the military use of (thermo)nuclear weapons, their implications for stability, and their nature as a technological innovation. His exploration shows how these debates contributed to contradictory understandings of nuclear weapons across political, academic, and public discourse – many of which continue to influence contemporary thinking. Sylvest puts forward that one should not only focus on financial and security costs, but also on the hidden costs for the environment and marginalised communities to disenchant nuclear weapons.

Departing from the historical perspective, in Chapter 3, Patricia Lewis emphasises the need to rethink outdated strategic doctrines amid a changing risk environment in the 21st century. She argues that recent developments, such as heightened awareness of nuclear winter, the environmental impact of detonation, and the lowering of thresholds for nuclear use, have reshaped the nuclear risk calculations. While the probability of nuclear use remains low, its consequences have grown exponentially. Lewis asserts that a human error surrounding nuclear weapons cannot be eradicated in an increasingly complex security environment. Thus, she concludes that due to the disproportionate risks of nuclear weapons, they should be abandoned.

In Chapter 4, Katarzyna Kubiak examines the relationship between vertical proliferation – the qualitative and quantitative enhancement of existing nuclear arsenals (62) – and nuclear disarmament. Through a legal analysis of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), she argues that the treaty does not explicitly prohibit vertical proliferation. However, Kubiak highlights how modernisation efforts – such as extending the lifespan of warheads – can undermine disarmament obligations by improving nuclear capabilities. She also acknowledges that modernisation measures – like reducing warhead numbers – could align with the NPT's disarmament goals. Kubiak proposes viewing the relationship between proliferation and disarmament as a spectrum, rather than a binary opposition (75). The chapter concludes with a call to action for non-nuclear-weapon states to challenge practices that violate the spirit of the NPT.

Complementing Kubiak's analysis, in Chapter 5, Rodger A. Payne explores how ridicule – instrumental humour that exposes the absurdity of ideas (92) – can stigmatise nuclear deterrence and promote normative change. He contends that deterrence remains the

central justification for nuclear weapons. Yet its logical flaws, exposed through academic critique and cultural satire, make deterrence vulnerable to ridicule. Payne argues that ridicule can drive normative change by delegitimising deterrence in public and elite perceptions, thereby weakening the normative foundation of nuclear weapons. He concludes by advocating for a broader use of ridicule to challenge the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence in both scholarly and public discourse.

Chapters 6 and 7 offer complementary evaluations of the TPNW. Firstly, Nina Tannenwald asserts that the TPNW created a new non-universal legal norm banning nuclear weapons amid strong opposition by nuclear powers. She addresses the treaty's criticisms, such as the lack of verification, potential distraction from pragmatic arms control, and risk of reinforcing nuclear states' justifications for nuclear weapons. Compared to a traditional disarmament treaty, Tannenberg argues that the treaty should be seen as a normative tool for stigmatising nuclear weapons and moving closer towards an absolute nuclear taboo.

Building on Tannenberg's evaluation, Michal Onderco examines in Chapter 7 the TPNW's institutional impact on the non-proliferation regime. His analysis reveals that the TPNW has not bridged divides between non-aligned states and those under extended deterrence, nor has it played a significant role in the NPT review conferences. While he finds no conflict between the two treaties, he concludes that the TPNW has not advanced disarmament within the NPT framework. Together, these chapters highlight the TPNW's potential to reshape norms, but also its limited practical influence on global disarmament efforts.

In Chapter 8, Harald Müller argues for the creation of new institutions, both physical and ideational, to verify, enforce, and sustain disarmament towards a non-nuclear world. He proposes eliminating reconstitution capabilities, developing robust verification systems to prevent breakout, and establishing an informal security concert system among major powers to avoid war. He calls for replacing deterrence thinking with conventional defence, collective security, and diplomacy (160) to prevent war. While Müller sees the TPNW as a vital normative step to reinforce the nuclear taboo, he stresses that it alone cannot guarantee a non-nuclear future.

Campbell Craig examines the prospects for nuclear disarmament within the current anarchic international system in Chapter 9. He argues that disarmament is implausible due to the absence of a reliable verification mechanism, enduring faith in deterrence, the unique destructive nature of nuclear weapons, and the ease of reconstitution. Without a central authority to enforce and monitor disarmament, Craig contends, a nuclear-free world remains unimaginable. He proposes a radical transformation of the international system through the creation of a world government capable of ensuring irreversible disarmament by all states, including major powers. Though he acknowledges this idea as "utopian" (177), Craig sees it as the only path to a lasting non-nuclear peace.

Overall, *Non-Nuclear Peace* succeeds in leaving "the trenches and to make another constructive step forward in the thinking on how to reach and sustain a peaceful order without nuclear weapons" (4). By critically engaging with over 70 years of nuclear peace research, the book presents both the possibilities and practical limitations of achieving nuclear abolition in the long term. It sets realistic expectations, framing disarmament as a gradual process unfolding over decades. Within this framework, the volume effectively situates the TPNW as a humanitarian-driven tool for delegitimising nuclear weapons and fostering global normative change.

One of the book's key contributions is its emphasis on norm-building and discursive strategies. By emphasising the increasingly drastic consequences of nuclear weapons, the contributors convincingly illustrate the weapons' immorality. However, the book does not resolve the security concerns that drive nuclear-armed states to retain their arsenals. As Payne notes, deterrence remains the central "justification for the retention of nuclear arsenals" (90). Müller advocates for creating a "Concert of Europe"-style (158) security system to create a stable security environment. In a time of heightened animosities and mutual distrust, it is hard to imagine smaller nuclear states, such as Israel or North Korea, abandoning their nuclear capabilities to truthfully cooperate with adversarial states, such as the U.S. or Iran. While the book rightly argues that states themselves create a security environment that requires nuclear weapons, it does not conceptualise which credible security guarantees could replace deterrence for smaller nuclear powers or those allies under extended deterrence.

Furthermore, some readers may find the book lacking in realisable disarmament strategies. Craig's proposal for a world government, or Müller's proposals for forcible responses to a nuclear breakout, remain largely theoretical. Müller's suggestions to reinterpret Article 51 of the UN Charter or empower the General Assembly to authorise a forceful response to a nuclear breakout through a Uniting for Peace resolution raise significant legal and political challenges. The former might evolve through customary law, but the latter would require amendments to the UN Charter – an unlikely prospect given the Security Council's gridlock. Finally, a question persists: How does a forceful attack on a state developing nuclear weapons prevent the state from using these weapons as a measure of last resort?

The book also leaves open the question of how discursive strategies apply beyond Western contexts. The strategies help to stigmatise and delegitimise nuclear weapons within the U.S. and its allies. They offer limited insight into how discursive strategies might influence nuclear policy in states with limited or no democratic oversight, such as Russia, China, Iran, or North Korea. The potential for normative pressure to drive political change in authoritarian or diplomatically isolated states remains underexplored.

That being said, *Non-Nuclear Peace* is a valuable contribution to the field of nuclear peacekeeping. It brings together diverse and compelling arguments that challenge current deterrence thinking, introduce innovative tools for normative change, and propose institutional pathways toward a nuclear-free world, though mostly theoretical in nature. Anyone – student or expert – interested in the future of global security and nuclear disarmament will find this a thought-provoking read.

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