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Review of "Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace: The Rise, Demise and Revival of Arms Control" by Michael Krepon

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Michael Krepon. *Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace: The Rise, Demise and Revival of Arms Control*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2021. Pp.628.

According to the late Michael Krepon, the fortunes of arms control diplomacy have had the same trajectory as an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (or ICBM). After generating copious fire, smoke and little else in the years after the Second World War, arms control began to accelerate during the Kennedy administration, rode out the turbulence of détente and reached its apogee in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet after having achieved such glorious heights, it stalled out in Clinton's second term before succumbing to the gravitational pull of resurgent superpower competition and the post-9/11 American national security pivot. Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, arms control's descent seems to have attained terminal velocity, shedding hard-fought arms control agreements like chaff as it hurtles towards an explosive demise.

Lamentations heralding the death of arms control have multiplied like North Korean missile tests in the last few years, inspired by a stream of assaults upon the international order. Krepon, however, hopes that his ICBM analogy ends before detonation, and that arms control can be redirected back to orbit. In his words, "Archimedean principles" and "Newton's Third Law" have "always applied to the practice of nuclear arms control," suggesting a cyclical rather than terminal trajectory (p. 9). He argues that an inverse relationship exists between arms control diplomacy and its corollary, nuclear deterrence, which is both too dangerous and unstable to prevent a mushroom cloud apocalypse. Krepon therefore largely rejects the premise that deterrence reduces the risk of nuclear war, or at least can control the escalation of a nuclear exchange. It is only when arms control is ascendant that he believes progress can be made to increase communication and trust between nuclear armed states, to stabilize nuclear competitions and to negotiate de-escalatory agreements.

Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace is therefore a passing of the baton from one of the elder statesmen of American arms control – a baton wrapped in marching orders for a new generation of analysts and advocates. However, these marching orders bookend a comprehensive 450-page history of American nuclear diplomacy from 1945 to 2020, divided into chronological chapters roughly organized by presidential administration. Krepon is well-placed to tell this

story. As a former congressional staffer, State Department official, university professor and co-founder of the famous DC-based Stimson Centre, he is about as credentialed and well-connected as any arms controller in the business. His book reflects both his experience and his friends, drawing from close to a hundred interviews with American academics and current and former officials, and benefitting from Krepon's keen understanding of American political partisanship, the U.S. State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA). In short, it is based in a career analyzing, advocating and participating in arms control initiatives – a career evidenced by 21 previous books and 500 articles.

Krepon also describes *Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace* as the payment of a debt owed to all the friends and colleagues who worked alongside him in the field. This obligation, as is so often the case in the work of scholars who are also practitioners, creates a certain home-team bias in the text. It is hard to escape the impression that this story has both heroes (Robert Oppenheimer, William Foster, George Schultz, Paul Nitze, Colin Powell) and villains (Edward Teller, Henry Kissinger, Paul Nitze, and John Bolton) which line up loosely along the arms control and deterrence divide. This is also a distinctly American narrative in which nearly all the key figures (heroes and villains) are found in Washington, as is the origin of all the key arms control agreements. Lastly, many of Krepon's friends and former colleagues are given a 2-3 paragraph summary of their place of birth, education and formative experiences, reflecting the author's desire to honour both the people and the political process of arms control. These tangents contribute colour to the book, but also add significantly to its length

The strength of this book is twofold. First, Krepon presents a nuanced retelling of the internal bureaucratic and legislative battles which shaped the American approach to arms control, especially the byzantine politics of the Senate. He clearly articulates the role of the ACDA in engineering a flurry of arms control agreements in the 1960s, and acting as a counter-balance to the State Department and Pentagon. He also bares the partisan dynamics which allowed Republican presidents such as Reagan and Bush to ratify multiple agreements and treaties, while limiting Democratic administrations to “one bite” at the arms control apple (p. 435). Democratic Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, for example, figures prominently in the book as treaty-spoiler and arms control skeptic, bedeviling every negotiation

from the Kennedy administration to Reagan's first term. In later chapters, his role is taken up by a slew of Republican isolationists, culminating in the "America First" iconoclasm of Donald Trump.

This mixture of partisan actors, global events, scientific advancements and theoretical arguments, spinning in the centrifuge of American politics, creates a formidably complex narrative. The Nixon-Kissinger negotiations especially require a level of esoteric knowledge on system capabilities and "throw-weight" calculations that has left many aspiring scholars tempted by a one-way trip on a Soviet Backfire bomber, if only to end the suffering. Yet Krepon brings a clarity to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) agreements and Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty which indicates both a comprehensive understanding of the issues at stake and a strong grasp of the American personalities in play. This grasp occasionally leads him to attempt to re-split the atom—numerous pages are spent psychoanalyzing "the perfect odd couple," Gorbachev and Reagan (p. 268)—but these are minor flaws in an authoritative and timely survey of nearly 80 years of American nuclear diplomacy.

Second, Krepon is fully willing to acknowledge the "demise" of arms control, both in the title of his book and in the content. He, like the Stimson Centre he co-founded, take a pragmatic approach to deal-making that eschews absolutism and accepts the "ground realities" of our current multipolar order. Krepon therefore concedes that Republican treaty-busting is not simply an aberration in the rise of arms control diplomacy (as it was constructed well into this century), but instead a fundamental challenge which has broken the old frameworks. The current nuclear competitions between the United States, Russia, China, India and Pakistan require different solutions than the stolid two-party treaty-making of the Cold War. Krepon therefore proposes a more agile, multilateral approach based on three normative principles which are perhaps the most successful legacy of arms control: the norm against battlefield use, the prohibition on nuclear tests, and the norm of non-proliferation. It is through the strengthening of such norms, rather than numbers-based formal treaties, that he hopes arms control diplomacy can be revived.

This is Krepon's formula for the ascendance of a new kind of arms control diplomacy. Negotiations can no longer be largely bilateral, nor can they continue to pursue formal treaties, nor use steep cuts in strategic forces as the metric for success. Instead Krepon draws upon the wider historical lessons of American nuclear diplomacy to

argue that arms control is most useful as a vector for communication and norm-building— necessary precursors to any agreement on the reduction or elimination of nuclear weapons. The first step is not to make nuclear weapons illegal (as was done in 2017 by the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons), but instead to achieve small but importance successes – like getting the world’s seven (official) nuclear-armed states to agree to a forum for ongoing arms control discussions. Only then can arms controllers seek to sheathe the swords which deterrence theorists have spent the last two decades sharpening.

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