A Steampunk History of the Cold War

In his article “Thickening the American Nuclear Disarmament” (September/October 2015), Matthew Kroenig cites his own work in the journal International Organization to claim that nuclear proliferation matters. Kroenig fails to mention, however, that other scholars in the very same issue of the journal find the opposite to be true. Todd Sechser and Matthew Fehrman conclude that nuclear weapons are simply not effective tools for communication. (The blog Post of Misvior hosted an online exchange in March between Kroenig and Sechser and Fehrman.) Policymakers too busy to referee this debate would still do well to scrutinize Kroenig’s model before embarking on a massive arms buildup. His model implies an entire history of the Cold War that could not be stranger. We were steampunk, Sechser and Fehrman, for example, wonder about Kroenig’s nuclear superpower that united the United States to form competing superpowers into the Soviet era in 1964. I, too, am puzzled by the extent of Kroenig’s data set, especially the claim that the United States suffered a string of four crisis “defeats” that coincided with the onset of a period of imagined Soviet superiority in the 1970s. Kroenig measures superiority through sheer bean counting, including “bare” lines of nuclear weapons for air defense. In real life, U.S. policymakers did not believe Soviet nuclear forces to be superior, despite some panicky hand-wringing about an “imagined” window of vulnerability. At least two chairsmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were asked at the time whether they would trade strategic nuclear forces with the Soviet Union. The answer each time was no. Kroenig’s four “defeats,” meanwhile, are bizarre. According to Kroenig’s model, winning U.S. nuclear superiority helps explain why a Democratic Congress refused the Ford administration’s request to aid one side in the Afghan civil war, the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979, some unspecified outcome from the 1983 Able Archer NATO exercise that terrified the Soviets, and a Soviet shipment of MIG-21s in 1984 that may have been intended for Nicaragua but never arrived. In the original data set, the last two cases are coded as neither worse nor lesser. Kroenig presents both as U.S. defeats for reasons that are obscure. The Able Archer military exercise, much in the news recently, suggests a conceptual omission in Kroenig’s analysis: the downsides of superiority. Kroenig says the state with more nuclear weapons is more likely to get its way in a crisis. It is nice to get one’s way, of course, but what if the risk of the crisis ends in a nuclear disaster, whether by accident, inadvertence, or misperception? The extreme Soviet paranoia during the Able Archer incident suggests that superiority can frighten an adversary into doing dangerous things, particularly if its leadership is less than perfectly rational. So I’d hold off on starting that arms race with the Russians and Chinese—at least until we see a couple more regression models.

Matthew Kroenig replies

In arguing against cuts to the U.S. nuclear arsenal, I explain that because nuclear superpower capability carries strategic benefits and reduces major costs, the United States should not make further nuclear reductions. But in his letter, Jeffrey Lewis questions my claim that superpower enhances America’s ability to deter and coerce adversaries. He does not contest my claim that cuts do not aid American nonproliferation objectives, save money, or help abolish nuclear weapons altogether.

While the purpose of Lewis’s discussion of a number of crises between the United States and its adversaries is unclear, my best guess is that it is intended to show that nuclear weapons were irrelevant because they were not used or explicitly threatened. But this is a narrow-minded way to think about deterrence. After all, a cop on the beat can deter crime without drawing his firearm or threatening to use it. The deterrent effect of nuclear superiority is evident in the many crises that have not occurred, and in the high-stakes crises: Lewis references, the shadow of nuclear war loomed even larger.

Lewis asserts that nuclear crises are dangerous. I agree. But U.S. nuclear reductions only make them more dangerous by decreasing the probability that adversaries will capitulate and by maximizing the damage the United States would suffer in the event of war. Lewis asks for more regressions. He can have them. A growing body of social science research by Eric Bier, Yigal Naar, and others converges around the notion that robust nuclear arsenals enhance deterrence. Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, let’s assume that we are genuinely uncertain about whether superiority matters.

Even then, as the other points in my Foreign Policy article explain, it would be foolish to gamble on nuclear cuts. Nothing less than America’s national survival is at stake.

The Bold and the Cautionous

FOREIGN POLICY readers scanning the headline of Kevin Peraino’s article “How Lincoln Shaped Obama’s War” (September/October 2013) might surmise that it concerns content race. By positing African-American slaves, inviting freemen to serve in the Union army, and, during the last year of his life, imagining a nation in which African-Americans voted and enjoyed the economic opportunities that the United States offered, Lincoln was certainly preparing his comparison for a new world. But Peraino’s article concerns foreign policy, not racial policy, and the ways that President Barack Obama “is operating on a globe that Lincoln helped shape.” It is also about what the two men have in common and thus what Lincoln’s legacy might tell us about Obama’s eventual one.

Obama, Peraino remarks, embodies “a particular style of solid federalism [that] suited global politics in Lincoln’s era just as it does our own.” Peraino was indeed a Lincolnian trait in both domestic and foreign policy. As Peraino points out, during his first important foreign policy debate, Congressman Lincoln cautioned against war with Mexico. In congressional speeches in December 1847 and January 1848, Lincoln, while fellow lawmakers clamored

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