

Unpublished Note: “Nuclear Triggers and Safety Catches, the ‘FSU’ and the ‘FSRs’ ” (1992)

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THE US and other Western leaders have been celebrating the breakup of the evil empire, the Former Soviet Union, or “FSU”; and the end of the Soviet nuclear threat to the West. But they sometimes seem to be continuing to try nostalgically to keep the old Empire—or most of it—together, under Moscow’s control. They seem even to be trying to preserve the General Staff and the unified Soviet military responsible, if at all, to Moscow. Or if not, to that quite insubstantial ghost of Empire, the Commonwealth of Independent States (the CIS). Which is to say, responsible to no one. The Soviet General Staff seems to be the only entity of the FSU which doesn’t need the qualifier “Former.”

Aside from nostalgia, it is the fear that the disintegration of the FSU might quicken the spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction that most often motivates Western efforts to keep Moscow in charge. We should indeed worry about an increase in the number of centers capable of deciding independently to launch nuclear weapons. But our leaders’ fears aren’t that precise. *That’s* part of the trouble.

In its vague form, this fear was one of the main justifications for their support of Gorbachev and Communist rule. They needed some existing national entity that could sign nuclear arms control agreements. Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, et al. weren’t national entities. Now that the former Soviet republics (the FSRs) do exist, and we recognize them, Western leaders continue to support Moscow. They have substituted Yeltsin (or possibly the General Staff) for Gorbachev, and the Russian Republic for the Soviet Union.

They have been pressing the non-Russian FSRs to transfer all nuclear weapons to the Russian republic. The FSRs such as Ukraine plainly don’t feel they need nuclear weapons to deter an unprovoked nuclear attack by the United States. (That was never a plausible fear in the Soviet Union itself.) Many of the political leaders of the FSRs have indicated they want to be free of nuclear weapons. However, several of the FSRs are uneasy about allowing the Russian republic, whose dominance they have only just escaped, to be the only FSR which could make an unimpeded decision to launch—or threaten to launch—nuclear weapons. They see that as a threat to their continuing independence.

Ukraine, for example, has for decades been a site for the development and manufacture of nuclear weapons, not to mention chemical and biological weapons.

Ukraine is likely to want to maintain some of the facilities they have, or build similar ones in the future. It seems the arrangements the US government has been pushing offer incentives for the spread of independent decision centers for the production and use of weapons of mass destruction. The Administration doesn't want Ukraine et al. to have nuclear weapons, but apparently it *does* want Russia to have them.

The Administration has made statements to the effect that it wants to see Russia keep nuclear weapons, even if they're aimed at us.

In December, Secretary Baker wound up in Brussels at the end of a long trip that took him to Moscow, Bishkek, Alma Ata, Minsk and Kiev. He held a press conference where he was asked,

Mr. Secretary, you said a minute ago that you were not unambiguously in favor of Russia becoming a non-nuclear power because you said you weren't prepared to walk away from the concept of deterrence. Can you be a little more specific as to who the Russian nuclear weapons are deterring?

Secretary Baker answered:

No, and I won't right now be any more specific with you about whom our weapons are deterring. But over the past forty years they have served as a substantial and significant deterrent, and I would like to see zero weapons targeted on the United States, but I'm not prepared today here, having said that, to subscribe to the philosophy of de-nuclearization. That's all I was saying.

How's that again? He and some of his advisors, like the Director of Policy Planning, have been clearer. However, on the subject of the spread of nuclear weapons in general, the fog at Foggy Bottom has been dense for many years. And it's been pretty cloudy about American interests in the disposition of the nuclear weapons, materials and facilities that are now distributed in the territory of several of the FSRs.

It may be that some members of our Foreign Service feel that the Administration's reluctance to see the republics abandon nuclear weapons is because America *needs* adversaries armed with nuclear weapons in order to deter them from an attack on us. But then it's hard to see why we can't fortify our deterrence by letting *other* FSRs have the ability to launch weapons independently, so we could deter *them*. It's hard to see, then, why we should worry about Iran and Libya, or even Saddam. Poor Saddam, he's been trying so hard to get a nuclear force which we could also deter!

Nuclear weapons are likely to spread further, without US encouragement, and to countries that might use them or threaten to use them for purposes hostile to American interests. They'll be forces to exercise US capabilities for deterrence. On the whole, it's a better idea to slow or to reduce their increase as much as possible. But policy in this connection will be better if the US is clearer.

It's in the US interest, of course, to see as many of the nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Union disabled and destroyed as is feasible. But that process will take a lot of time. Put that aside for the moment and consider the control of those weapons that are not scheduled for destruction.

We need to make at least one basic distinction: that between "control" meaning the power to decide to launch a nuclear weapon; and "control" meaning the power to *veto* a decision to launch a nuclear weapon. There's a difference between a finger on the trigger and a finger on the safety catch. The "trigger" or the "safety catch," like the "button," of course is a metaphor. But a useful one in this case.

When we say we want to "concentrate" "control" in order to reduce the number of decisionmakers who control nuclear weapons, we mean we want to have as few fingers as possible on the "trigger." [OR: When one talks of reducing the number of people in "control" of nuclear weapons, it's the number of fingers on the trigger that's contemplated.] We mean we want to minimize the number of those who can, without interference or veto, launch any of the nuclear weapons in the territory of the FSU. From the standpoint of the prospective targets, maximum safety would be achieved when the number of fingers on the trigger is zero.

As for fingers on the "safety catch," the more the merrier.

The United States had many weapons overseas under multi-key arrangements. From the standpoint of the United States, it seemed important that such weapons couldn't be used without a US representative turning a key or inserting one essential part of the combination. Host countries, on the other hand, in general didn't want weapons launched from their territory without consent. They didn't want the weapons launched unless they had turned *their* key or inserted *their* part of the combination. Such arrangements can be made so that the weapons are not usable (without the efforts of a national laboratory) unless all combinations are inserted from remote sources.

Neither Russia nor the non-Russian republics are worried about an American or French or British threat. They may worry about threats from each other that might come up in the course of the painful process of the division of assets, populations, etc., in which differences might be settled or strongly influenced by the potential use of weapons of mass destruction.

From the American standpoint, but also from the standpoint of the FSRs, the best way to avoid those problems is to distribute vetoes over decisions to use nuclear weapons, wherever they are, rather than to distribute nuclear weapons or see their spread as counters to each other.

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