To Tango Alone: Problems of Theory and Practice in the Sociology of Arms Control, Nonproliferation, Disarmament, and Great Power Competition

by Christopher A. Ford

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In this paper, Assistant Secretary Ford offers some thoughts on conceptual currents in international relations thinking over the last generation that helped both produce and lead to the failure of major elements of the post-Cold War agenda in arms control, disarmament policy, and great power relations. This paper, however, also explores how we may find a better path forward, informed by a sounder understanding of some of these same currents.

This series of *Arms Control and International Security Papers* has repeatedly addressed issues of great power competition. This emphasis on great power challenges derives from the 2017 National Security Strategy, and this emphasis upon competitive strategy is perhaps *the* signature contribution of the current U.S. administration in foreign and national security policy. This paper approaches this subject from a more theoretical perspective.

This paper describes conceptual currents that emerged in international relations theory early in the post-Cold War period, then explores how Western leadership elites of the period seem, in practice, to have misunderstood or misapplied such insights in ways that helped lead to the failure of the arms control, nonproliferation, disarmament, and broader geopolitical agenda espoused by those elites. Finally, it will examine how it may be possible for leaders today to learn *better* lessons for *praxis* by drawing in more nuanced ways upon those same theoretical insights ─ and how some such learning is already being put into practice in U.S. policy.

I. The Post-Cold War Revolution

For those who did not live through it as adults, it may be hard today to appreciate just what an earthquake it was for the decades-entrenched, world-risking rivalries and bipolar geopolitical certainties of the Cold War to come to an end. These changes presented challenges and opportunities, for existing theories of international relations had, it was felt, displayed their "inability to

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foreshadow, let alone foresee," what had occurred.[2] In response, the post-Cold War world rethought international relations theory in order to explain things.

In the academy, the sub-discipline of "constructivist" international relations theory thereupon came to the fore. A pioneering generation of "constructivist" international relations theorists emerged, starting with Nicholas Onuf, who wrote about "sense-making" and "world-making" in 1989, and picking up speed with scholars such as Alexander Wendt, Emanuel Adler, and Friedrich Kratochwil during the 1990s. These thinkers offered a *social* theory of international relations, in contrast to more traditional assumptions that international politics was principally a question of rational-choice behavior and decisions by egoist actors pursuing (more or less) objective interests and making utilitarian calculations within a (more or less) fixed system of international structures. For them, international actors, institutions, and structures were not exogenous, *a priori* "givens," but instead socially constructed — and therefore necessarily not fixed in form or function over time, and subject to ongoing dynamics of contestation and renegotiation by participants in the system, acting individually or collectively.[3]

The classic classroom illustration of this kind of insight is Alexander Wendt's famous observation that a large number of *British* nuclear weapons is far less threatening to the United States than even a handful of North Korean weapons — not because of any differentiation in their physical destructiveness or capacity to be launched (*i.e.*, factors related to the *material structure* of the international system), but rather as a result of how these two respective arsenals are situated in the social context of international politics (*i.e.*, its *social* structure). This example points out the importance of that context, demonstrating that there are highly salient aspects of international relations that cannot be understood without appreciation of their social construction. In Peter Katzenstein's account, for instance, it became clear that "[w]hat scholars and policy makers

consider to be national security issues is not fixed but varies over time," including "the state interests that predominant explanations of national security often take for granted."[4]

In some respects, of course, this approach to understanding the social construction of international order wasn't really an *international relations* theory at all — rather being, as Onuf realized, a conception that situated international relations in a broader universe of human social relationships, *all* of which functioned in this way.[5] Despite this theoretical breadth, however, where constructivism seems to have had the largest impact, was in its original home of international relations theory. There, it aspired to offer what Alexander Wendt described as a new socially-constructed "ontology of international life."[6]

II. Enthusiasm and Application

Irrespective of how broadly it could be said to apply, this kind of thinking — which blossomed in scholarly popularity during the 1990s — had consequences not simply as a "mostly interpretive metatheory" in the academy but even, in perhaps unintended ways, among Western policy elites grappling with the new post-Cold War environment. From the perspective not so much of theory but instead of how some seem to have tried to translate such insights into practice, constructivism seemed attractive. Crucially, to many policymakers, constructivism's emphasis upon ideational factors, and its conclusion that the architecture of our international reality is not fixed but rather subject to change, have seemed not only to explain the unexpected evaporation of the Cold War and its associated rivalries, but also to signal the possibility that the international environment could be further transformed through a deliberate policy agenda.

To be sure, this jump, from description to prescription, was not wild fantasy on the part of the

2   *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (Peter J. Katzenstein, ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), at 2-3.

3   To observe that international relations, and its actors and institutions, are socially constructed, of course, is *not* to say that the *physical* environment in which such construction occurs is socially constructed.

4   *The Culture of National Security, supra*, at 1, 10, & 25-29.

5   Nicholas Onuf, *Making Sense, Making Worlds: Constructivism in social theory and international relations* (London: Rutledge, 2013), at xxii, 196, & 203.

6   Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), at 370-72.

policymaking community, for the constructivists themselves sometimes suggested that their insights might open up new possibilities for effecting change. Observing that "every world is forever remaking itself," for example, Onuf raised the possibility that constructivist insights might allow the *further* transcendence of traditional structures and dynamics – including perhaps transcending the idea of the "nation" itself.[7] After pointing out that constructivism might show how states could "transform" international culture, Wendt also argued that such awareness creates "a potential for self-intervention designed to change the logic and bring international society under a measure of rational control" through some sort of "'constitutional design, 'engineering,' or 'steering'" to "design institutions that would steer the evolution of international society in certain directions."[8]

In the post-Cold War environment, in which sweeping change had already proven itself possible and Western policy elites appeared to be the masters of all they surveyed, such suggestions seem to have been intoxicating, being received as invitations to turn the interpretive metatheoretical framing of constructivist insight into an opportunity to engage in "world-making" as a deliberate *policy agenda*. As applied in this way, however, this gave rise to problems, not necessarily because the theory was unsound, but rather because, in effect, enthusiastic Western policy elites oversimplified the constructivist insight and mistook its analytical descriptivism for a playbook with which the world could be remade to specification.

I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Western policy elites of the new era were themselves constructivist scholars, were well versed in the theory and its ongoing development, or in many cases were necessarily even aware that such a new approach even existed as a distinct academic sub-discipline at all. In fact, were these leaders *actual* constructivists, or better ones, some of the problems that will be described herein might have been avoided. As I will argue, a more *genuine* understanding of constructivist insights can help leaders approach policymaking with more perspicacity than Western policymaking often displayed during the period of post-

Cold War enthusiasm — and indeed today I believe some of this is now starting to happen.

The point is rather that some of the basic ideas that found intellectual expression and were increasingly refined by constructivist theorists in the academy — ideas about the social construction of international reality, the non-permanence of its central features and its potential to undergo radical structural changes as demonstrated by the end of the Cold War, and of at least the theoretical *possibility* of deliberately transforming the environment as a policy agenda — seem to have been held in some form, implicitly or explicitly, by broad swathes of the policy community during much of the post-Cold War era. These assumptions were not necessarily expressed in explicitly constructivist framings or accompanied by any particular self-awareness *as being* constructivist. Nevertheless, as we will see below, a striking number of policy initiatives during the period seem indeed to bear the imprint of such concepts — even if, as we shall see, they were only vaguely and simplistically understood.

The resulting enthusiasm for ideational (and therefore socio-environmental) reengineering — which I'll call *pseudo-constructivism*, out of respect for the theoreticians whom I doubt would have endorsed such simplistic appropriation — had various manifestations in the post-Cold War geopolitical arena. One can see its footprints, as it were, in the policy choices of leadership elites in various areas. This paper will focus upon how this played out in arms control, nonproliferation, disarmament, and great power competition.

A. Disarmament and Arms Control

In disarmament and arms control, it was certainly possible to show progress in dramatically reducing nuclear weapons stockpiles once the easing of Cold War tensions enabled leaders to conclude that the large arsenals they had accumulated during the period of competition and confrontation were no longer necessary. As a result, the nuclear powers dramatically reduced the size of these arsenals to the point that today, for example, the American arsenal stands at a mere 13 percent or so of its Cold War peak.

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[7] Onuf, *supra*, at xix & 205.
[8] Wendt, *supra*, at 367 & 377.

This progress did indeed seem to validate the constructivist insight both that "threat" is a socially constituted concept and that dramatic changes can follow from realignments of collective perceptions and understandings. After the elimination of such "surplus" nuclear weapons stocks had largely been accomplished by the mid-2000s, however, the process ran up against the limits still imposed by the continuing perceptions of threat and national security need that still remained in a security environment that was by then once again deteriorating.

Faced with the obstacles that thus arose to continuing post-Cold War disarmament progress *indefinitely*, key Western policy elites seem to have assumed they could simply make up for the difference through pseudo-constructivist ideational engineering. If countries still felt a need for at least *some* nuclear weapons, it seems to have been assumed, this could be overcome if *we* showed everyone else the way: further progress could be catalyzed if the United States led the way to further cuts, setting off a virtuous circle of willful Onufian world-*remaking*.

Such thinking seems to have underlain President Obama's signature speech in Prague in April 2009, in which he situated his efforts to cut back U.S. nuclear weapons capabilities in just such an effort to catalyze *further* change in the international arena. "To put an end to Cold War thinking," he proclaimed, "we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same." Where we led, others would follow – but this progress had to *begin* with the United States: "we will begin the work of reducing our arsenal."

It was, in fact, one of the striking characteristics of the Obama Administration — even in its later years, at a time when Russian revisionism was already obvious in Putin's invasion of Georgia and testing for a new nuclear-capable cruise missile with a range that violated the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and at a time when the PRC's own military buildup was accelerating — was Washington's relative *lack* of concern for great power competition, and its conviction that the United States could *still* catalyze disarmament progress if it led by example.

In 2013, for instance, President Obama doubled down on his promise to lead global nuclear disarmament by example, announcing his desire to negotiate "up to a one-third reduction in deployed strategic nuclear weapons from the level established in the New START Treaty."

According to Obama, the United States was ready to "reduc[e] our deployed strategic nuclear weapons by up to one-third. … At the same time, we'll work with our NATO allies to seek bold reductions in U.S. and Russian tactical weapons in Europe."

In fact, the Obama Administration all but refused to address issues of great power competition in its nuclear posture, focusing instead primarily upon the need to prevent nuclear terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and upon nuclear security — an emphasis that led to the convening of four high-profile "Nuclear Security Summits" between 2010 and 2016. As for nuclear weapons threats from "near-peer" competitors such as Russia and the PRC, both of which were then dramatically stepping up their nuclear modernization and efforts to expand their arsenals, Washington then seemed to assume that competitive dynamics could be short-circuited if America set a good example in trying to disarm. Even as late as January 2017, Vice President Biden declared that despite Russia's "counterproductive moves" in the nuclear weapons arena, "American leadership on this issue need not wait for Russia," and the United States could lead in achieving disarmament "by the power of our example."

To this end, it was a major thrust of U.S. policy to bring about a situation in which the "sole purpose" of American nuclear weapons would be simply to deter the use of *other* nuclear weapons. As Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes put it in 2016, "[w]e … made it U.S. policy to pursue the objective of making deterrence against a nuclear attack the 'sole purpose' of our arsenal." According to Vice President Biden, the Administration had "made a commitment to create the conditions by which the sole purpose of nuclear weapons would be to deter others from launching a nuclear attack."

This "sole purpose" ambition is telling. As former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry explained it with remarkable candor in 2009, a "sole purpose" nuclear weapons declaratory policy is actually the same thing as a "no first use" (NFU) pledge – though Perry preferred the former phrase because, he suggested, "no first use" sounds unappealingly weak to American ears. "Sole purpose," therefore, is really no more than "NFU in mufti … developed as a way to *rebrand* 'No First Use' so it could be sold, *sub silentio,* to American audiences."

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And indeed the implications of an American "sole purpose" (a.k.a. NFU) declaration would have been hugely significant. Were it to be understood that the *only* purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the use of *other* such weapons, this would have amounted to a renunciation of nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis conventional military invasion — that is, a wholesale repudiation of the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" that has helped shield Europe and East Asia from Soviet (later Russian) and PRC conventional military power for generations. For that reason, I have argued, in the current security environment,

> "a U.S. NFU declaration would be desperately unwise — a blow to the heart of our alliance system, a potential signal to would-be regional aggressors (and our friends) that we do not intend to defend our alliance partners, and a repudiation of decades of bipartisan and trans-oceanic good sense and agreement upon one of the most important planks of U.S. foreign and national security policy."

For this reason, the Obama Administration's attachment to "sole purpose" theory may have been another sign of its investment in pseudo-constructivist thinking – specifically, the notion that the U.S. nuclear "example" would have some kind of systemically transformative effect. After all, at a time in which both Russian and PRC conventional military threats were growing, especially against U.S. friends and allies, such a crypto-NFU policy would be hard to justify in the *absence* of an assumption that Russian and Chinese threats would attenuate if Washington showed the way to a more pacific posture.

This assumption is especially remarkable in light of the fact that Vice President Biden recommitted himself to the "sole purpose" (NFU) dream even as late as *January 2017* — a point subsequent both to Moscow's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine and to Beijing's lawless assertions of unilateral dominion over offshore resources and accelerated militarization of disputed features in the South China Sea, and at which conventional military modernization in both Russia and the PRC was in the process of building destabilizing "anti-access/area-denial" (A2/AD) envelopes designed to degrade U.S. conventional forces' operational freedom of maneuver. This was indeed

a powerful signal of Western elites' faith in their own ability to transform the strategic environment by exhortation and example.[9]

Even more dramatically, further along the political continuum, the nuclear weapons "Ban" movement picked up steam during this same period, drawing strength from the expectations raised by President Obama's "Prague Speech" and the frustrations felt by many in the disarmament community that post-Cold War reductions seemed to be running out of steam. The resulting Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which has not received enough ratifications to enter into force, represents perhaps the epitome of pseudo-constructivist aspiration: a purported answer to the world's continuing problems of nuclear risk and geopolitical insecurity, but one that deliberately forswears actual concern with security and deterrence. It was, in effect, an undertaking in geopolitical wish-fulfillment predicated upon the notion that prevailing security conditions could be *unthought* and then *remade* to order, if only enough people "reached critical will" (as the slogan went) in desiring this with sufficient fervor. The valuable constructivist insight that the security environment was socially constituted and *could* change, in other words, led disarmament enthusiasts to the more tendentious conclusion that it could be refashioned by *diktat*, and that in fact *they* could therefore change things as they wanted.

B. Iran Nonproliferation Policy

Another arguable manifestation of pseudo-constructivism appeared in 2015, with the nuclear arrangement with Iran known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The JCPOA failed to deliver in critical ways, however, in part because it seems to have relied upon facile pseudo-constructivist assumptions to fill its own conceptual gaps. The most fundamental flaw of the arrangement was that it actually *didn't* prevent precisely the problem that it had been the focus of f U.S. policy for years to avert: Iran's buildup of uranium enrichment capacity and fissile material stocks in ways that would facilitate rapid future weaponization. Indeed, the deal actually legitimated these capabilities and

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[9] William Perry's idea that NFU could be sold to Americans if repackaged as "sole purpose" theory is also tellingly pseudo-constructivist, suggesting both a self-conscious effort to "remake" perceived U.S. national interest through creative relabelling and to conceal from the public that one is doing so.

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permitted Iran to have them in the later years of the arrangement.

Worse, the JCPOA actually impeded *future* efforts to solve this very problem it had declined to solve, by foreclosing the international community's ability to use sanctions to forestall the all but inevitable eventual JCPOA-legitimated Iranian nuclear buildup. Nor was this coincidental: it was structural, for the deal itself barred reimposing nuclear sanctions on Iran to pressure it to accept more enduring limits on its nuclear capacities.

Perhaps in a loose analogy to how the Clinton Administration had reportedly agreed in 1994 to provide nuclear reactors to North Korea on the basis of an assumption that the regime in Pyongyang probably wouldn't survive long enough to take delivery, the JCPOA seems to have gambled on some kind of catalytic transformation that would solve the longer-term proliferation problems the Iran deal itself worsened not by constraining or eliminating Iran's threat capabilities but rather by *transforming Iran itself*. The deal's mere *delay* of Iran's acquisition of nuclear capabilities may have seemed to make sense through the prism of a pseudo-constructivist conceit that *the very act of reaching a nuclear deal with Iran* would lead to more general improvements in the relationship as the parties learned to trust each other. The deal, in other words, seems to have been rooted in the idea that Iran's eventual, JCPOA-legitimated accumulation of nuclear capabilities would not be threatening because *by the time it occurred the deal itself would have catalyzed an across-the-board improvement in Iran's behavior and relationship with the rest of the world*.

And indeed the Obama Administration does seem to have expected that the JCPOA would catalyze transformation. President Obama, for instance — picking up themes he had earlier voiced upon coming into office, when he offered an "extended hand" to Iran and called for "renewed exchanges among our people and opportunities for partnership and commerce" — declared that the deal would allow Iran "to move in a different, less provocative direction." Indeed, the JCPOA itself noted that its participants "anticipate that full implementation of this JCPOA will positively contribute to regional and international peace and security." (This impression is accentuated by the fact that U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015) imposed an arms embargo upon Iran with an expiration date of October 2020 — by which

point one imagines it must have been assumed it would no longer be so threatening for Iran to have a full suite of modern weaponry.)

Until July 2015, a build-up of Iranian nuclear capacity had been deemed such a threat that sweeping international sanctions were needed to pressure Iran to come to negotiate a deal. With the JCPOA, however, that very same buildup was redefined as *non*-threatening by virtue of having been pushed a few years into the future, presumably because it would then exist in the hands, as it were, of a "different Iran" that had been domesticated by the West's engagement with it. Thus did pseudo-constructivism help the proponents of the JCPOA rationalize allowing Iran to have in 2030 what they conceded it was absolutely essential that Iran *not* have in 2015.

C. China Policy

Some analogous dynamics were also visible in the arena of great power competition. It was fundamental to the Western policy community's approach to China for most of the post-Cold War period, for instance, that the PRC's authoritarianism could be "domesticated" if the rest of the world welcomed it warmly enough into the community of nations. Rivalry and competition, after all, were social constructs. Especially since Western elites assumed that their mode of governance was the natural end-state for humankind — and that all *others* wished to emulate us if they could — it was easy to assume that our embrace would be transformative. It became Western policy, therefore, to assist and facilitate the PRC's rise as a major power: by the act of showing such goodwill and facilitating the growth of a Chinese middle class, we would "socialize" Beijing into being the kind of "responsible stakeholder" and cooperative partner we desired. In time, in fact, the PRC would end up a liberal democratic state like our own.

At the time, it was all but an axiom of the mainstream China policy community in the West that the principal danger to this happy future came not from Beijing's choices but rather from *those in the West* who warned that the PRC's rise might not be so salutary. It was commonplace for China policy specialists to declare that the surest way to *make* the PRC into an antagonist was to think about it as one. Accordingly, those warning that the Chinese Communist Party might have strategic objectives

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other than China just taking its assigned seat at a neoliberal global board meeting chaired by the United States were simply told to be quiet, lest talking about China as a competitor become a "self-fulfilling prophecy." The security environment would be kept benign by *willing* it thus.

D. Sovereignty and the Nation-State

In fact, pseudo-constructivist policy instrumentalism even seems to have gone so far as to have informed post-Cold War aspirations to transcend the entire system of state sovereignty. To be sure, one did not have to be a constructivist to admit that the romanticized conceits of 19th century nationalists, in which essentialist conceptions of ethno-racial identity were projected backwards into the mists of antiquity, were ahistorical nonsense. Nor did one have to be a constructivist to understand that the nation-states often taken for granted in recent centuries are to some degree contingent, malleable, and — yes — socially constructed institutions.

Long before constructivist scholars emerged on the scene, there was a powerful undercurrent of ambiguity and anxiety in international politics, during the decolonization struggles of the 20th Century, over who constituted the relevant "self" entitled to "self-determination." (Nigeria, for instance, fought a civil war over which "self" mattered, as a result of which there is no country of "Biafra" today.) Many of the initial conflicts and instability of the post-colonial world related in whole or in part to contestation over the composition and territorial extent of the "relevant self" that was to be privileged by the modern state system.

It was not precisely a novel insight, therefore, to point out the contingency and recurringly contested status of the nation-state. Nevertheless, in the post-Cold War era many Western policy elites seem to have taken this a step further — moving from the more traditional policy agenda of fighting over *which* "self" to privilege to a more radical one of trying to overcome the received conceptual framework of national sovereignty *itself*.

This was the era, after all, not just of the European Union's expansion to include many of the post-communist

states of Eastern Europe, but also of the deepening of the EU through a succession of agreements that broadened the range of issues subject to collective regulation from Brussels and led to an increasingly far-reaching corpus of Union law that took precedence over national rules. Savants talked of "pooled sovereignty," while in the broader arena a global criminal court was established and scholars debated the international community's right to protect citizens from their own governments. The tide seemed, for a time, to be running very much against venerable social constructs such as the nation-state. Indeed, as Francis Fukuyama reminds us, in Europe, sovereignty was *deliberately* diffused in order to "defang nationalism."[10]

Meanwhile, in society and culture, there arose a new demographic of cosmopolitan elites, having points of origin in many different countries but genuinely rooted in none, perfectly comfortable moving and living wherever opportunity might knock. For such subjectively global citizens, borders and sovereignty might just as well already have disappeared. And, in the pseudo-constructivist enthusiasms of the era, it may indeed have felt as if the rest of the world would soon follow their footsteps. Across much of the Western policy community, the period was characterized by widespread assumptions that free flows of information, capital, and labor would inexorably "t[ie] the world together into a single, cosmopolitan, neoliberal whole."

III. Running Aground

But much of this world-*remaking* turned out to be too good to be true. It was not wrong to learn from constructivists that the international structure and its dynamics are socially constructed, historically contingent, malleable, and subject to ongoing renegotiation. It was more problematic, however, to conclude that *because* of this social construction, Western policy elites have the option of *willing* the world into different and more congenial forms.

In their zeal to reimagine the communities and dynamics of the world, the Western elites of the 1990s and the early 21st Century seem to have misread constructivism, or at least they read it selectively and

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[10] Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2014), at 554.

simplistically. The most important thing about social construction that they overlooked is that it is *social*. The processes of mutually‑constitutive creation and re‑creation to which constructivist theorists called attention are *collective* processes that happen organically in the *aggregated* behavior of human social actors. These are not dynamics easily monopolized by one particular group or demographic, however well educated, well‑heeled, and well‑intentioned it might be; they can be quite resistant to being employed as a tool of one's policy agenda.

Despite his apparent interest in the idea of "steer[ing] the evolution of international society in certain directions," the constructivist scholar Alexander Wendt seems to have glimpsed this from the start. He warned years ago that efforts at socially reconstructive engineering might perhaps have "unintended consequences" as a result of fact that the international environment suffers from "the problems of 'heterocephaly'"[11] — a term used by Max Weber to describe systems subjecting key players to outside sources of authority, but which here can be taken simply to mean that the international "body" has many different heads.

And this is surely right, for to say that something is socially constructed is to say that it represents the sum of all the relevant attitudes, assumptions, preferences, and behavioral choices of all the relevant "players" in the system. It is very difficult for one element of a society to steer such aggregated outcomes, remaking the rest of the system in its own image; in social construction, as it were, the *other* elements also "get a vote." The agenda-focused pseudo‑constructivists of the post-Cold War period, however, seem to have overlooked what constructivist *theorists* in their shoes would surely not have forgotten: that you cannot "socially construct something" by yourself. To put it simply, as the saying goes, it takes two to tango.

In practice, therefore, one must remember that while it is true that social constructions are more malleable than many people instinctively assume, and that they are indeed capable of sometimes sweeping transformative change, they are at the least neither easily nor predictably so. As complex adaptive systems — and ones that are, moreover, composed of unit-level human components who *themselves* each possess a degree of agency and

make choices of their own — <u>outcomes in social systems are subject to complicated positive and negative feedback loops, sensitive to initial conditions, and are almost by definition extraordinarily difficult (or perhaps impossible) to predict</u>. All political systems are this way, and the system of global geopolitical relationships is the largest complex adaptive social system there is. It is therefore a mistake akin to magical thinking to assume that any given policy elite can smoothly "engineer" outcomes.

But Western policy elites either did not understand or ignored such insights, drawing simplistically upon a bowdlerized constructivism in assuming that where they led, the rest of the world-system would perforce follow. But it didn't, for those elites had tried to tango alone.

In domestic jurisdictions, recent years have seen a significant rise in Euroskepticism – not least leading to Britain's departure from the European Union – resistance to the unfettered free movement of labor and capital advocated by neoliberals, and a turn toward more traditional, sovereignty‑minded and inwardly‑focused, nationalism-infused policies in the countries of the West themselves. This created challenges for the neoliberal agenda.

For purposes of this paper, however, the most salient "unintended consequences" of the pseudo-constructivist project has been the role that this agenda seems to have played in (a) helping both to catalyze aggressively competitive and destabilizing *countervailing* behavior (as important major *non*-Western players stepped up mobilization against this agenda) and (b) delaying and impeding Western *responses* to that competitive behavior by non-Western players (as the West's own policy elites tried to cling to their dreams even as evidence of failure mounted). Thanks to the conceptual overreach and the ideologized inflexibility of that agenda, therefore, the ugly and dangerous state‑competitive environment of the present day may well be worse than it would otherwise have been, today's threats harder to meet, and tomorrow's opportunities harder to seize.

A. Rival Constructions

There is an irony here, in that some of the steps taken by the major non-Western authoritarian regimes in

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[11] Wendt, *supra*, at 376.

response to their own desires and priorities — and in reaction to the conjunction, in the post-Cold War era, of geopolitical unipolarity with integrationist neoliberal triumphalism — arguably *also* seem to partake of a pseudo-constructivist assumption that the social world can be reconstructed to specification. This is not to suggest that the decidedly *illiberal* elites in Beijing and Moscow were actually inspired by (or even aware of) the Western academy's turn toward constructivist theory, but it does at least suggest that *non*-Western elites *also* have great faith in their powers of purposive societal transformation.

1.   People's Republic of China

In fact, China has long had its own, pre-constructivist traditions of trying to use ideational and linguistic reconstruction as a tool for societal engineering. These approaches draw upon Communist notions of exerting social control in part through the coerced relabeling of phenomena in ways supporting regime legitimacy narratives and propaganda objectives, as well as upon China's Confucian tradition of the "rectification of names" — in which information about roles and relationships is encoded in descriptions (*e.g.*, with the duties and privileges of a "father" being considered inherent in that term itself), and the lived social reality of things is in large part *constituted* by acts of naming. Through this prism, in an important sense, description *is* reality.

This has long made questions of terminology fundamental not just in propaganda but also to successive Chinese regimes' legitimacy narratives and prospects for continued control and survival, as well as in how Chinese rulers have approached relations with the non-Chinese world. The assumed role of ideational framing and description in *making* things true also underlies the importance PRC officials place upon controlling narratives relevant to the image and nature of the CCP regime, both at home and abroad. (Hence the insecurity and sensitivity PRC officials display if others adopt the "wrong" discursive constructions.) These issues have been of great importance as the CCP regime works to maintain its own control at home and achieve its increasingly self-assertive strategic objectives abroad.[12]

Such Chinese dynamics, of course, date from centuries before Michel Foucault described "discursive structures" or Nicholas Onuf wrote of "sense-making and world-making" in constructivist international relations theory. Nevertheless, the CCP's modern-day obsessions with "discourse control" represent, in a sense, another variation on the pseudo-constructivist project.

These *ACIS Papers* have already repeatedly explored the modern PRC's geopolitical agenda, so I'll not belabor the point here, except to note that the CCP's vision is a profoundly revisionist one that revolves around <u>a carefully-nurtured narrative in which it is China's destiny to return itself to the position of geopolitical centrality that it imagines to be its birthright</u>. These dynamics would seem, therefore, to help validate the constructivist theoretical project, inasmuch as this worldview has been deliberately cultivated by CCP propagandists for many years, weaving together pre-existing themes in Chinese nationalist thinking with Leninist motifs from the Party's own Communist history. They have produced, however, a socially-constructed identity with a revisionist agenda starkly at odds with post-Cold War Western neoliberalism.

2.   The Russian Federation

For its part, the Putin regime in Russia also seems to have drunk from the pseudo-constructivist well in support of its own geopolitical objectives. A form of ideational reconstruction — fixated upon controlling and reconfiguring how Russia sees itself and its role in the world — has been a central piece of Vladimir Putin's project for perpetuating his own control, building up the power of the state apparatus, and restoring Russia to a position of power and status in the international arena. In effect, therefore, writing a new *story* for Russia has been central to Putin's agenda and legitimacy narrative from the outset.

> "<u>Russia … [has] developed its own 'myth of exceptionalism' that revolves around the idea of a recurring 'salvational role' in the international community won through defiant resistance and stoic martyrdom against endless waves of foreign enemies determined to subjugate and humiliate it. In its modern form as, in effect, the official ideology of the</u>

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Putin regime, such thinking draws heavily upon the early 20th Century writings of Ivan Ilyin, a White Russian emigre writer and intellectual who saw Russia's salvation lying in Christianized fascism — and whose name and work have been repeatedly invoked, referenced, and praised in recent years by many senior Russian officials and politicians, including Putin himself.

"In this conception, Russia is a distinct civilization having a unique essence and spirit that is constantly under threat from evil foreign forces, both physically and ideologically. These are threats against which Russians must always be vigilant, and in response to which it is necessary to organize politics along authoritarian lines not accountable to democratic or legal check. … This narrative involves, and indeed requires, finger-pointing at alleged outside threats … [and] paint[s] a disturbingly dark, dehumanizing narrative of his domestic opposition, which he describes as a 'fifth column' in league with foreign saboteurs and an unnatural and infectious bacterium of which Mother Russia must be cleansed.

"As this vision pertains to foreign policy behavior, it is particularly significant that the regime's dark and somewhat paranoid vision of the world is also powerfully bound up with a sort of imperial nostalgia, a longing for the status and sense of historical self-importance that Russia felt during the tsarist period and during its decades of Soviet global reach. Not for nothing, for instance, has Putin himself declared that if something had gone wrong in Russian history, it was the collapse of the USSR: the 20th Century's 'greatest global catastrophe.' The modern Russian regime thus promotes a kind of global restoration narrative, in which its self-assertive authoritarianism provides the vehicle for national or even civilizational resurrection."

This dark and competitive agenda is certainly not the optimistic neoliberal cosmopolitanism of post-Cold War Western elites, but it is a sort of purposive pseudo-constructivism nonetheless. Russia under Putin engaged in a deliberate and fairly explicit effort at ideational re-engineering all of its own, building a new, post-Soviet narrative of self-identity grounded in existential threat narratives and geopolitical revisionism vis-à-vis the West that forms a dramatic counterpoint to the Western globalist agenda.

3. Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran is a third example, for its regime has constructed a domestic legitimacy narrative and sense of self-identity around a highly ideologized conception of struggle against evil and corrupting outside forces — a social construction of national, and in some respects religious, *mission* that has encouraged a destabilizing regional revisionism entirely at odds with and in opposition to (albeit predating) the neoliberal elite agenda of the post-Cold War West. The Iranian regime's Shi'ite Islamism is an ideational amalgam constructed over many years – often quite deliberately, as a self-aware project of ideological engineering – first as a tool of political mobilization and then as a mechanism of regime control.

"Within the broader universe of political Islamism, the specifically Shi'ite Islamist ideology of the Iranian regime was formed in a dialectical conversation with, and in opposition to, 'the West' – making it, in Hamid Dabashi's excellent phrase, a 'theology of discontent' that culminated in Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's success in deploying the 'imagination of collective shame' as a political tool to justify a recombination of pre-existing political and juridical elements into a new ideology of clerical rule for a new revolutionary republic. … Iran's political Islam has also long aspired to having Iran be seen as a superlative civilization-state, remembering its sometime historical role as one of the world's superpowers and combining such nationalist recollections with Shi'ite themes of religious redemption …."

An account of all the ways in which this ideology has helped drive an aggressive Iranian agenda in the Middle East for decades is unnecessary here, but Iran, too, represents a sharp counterpoint to and contrast with the West's post-Cold War cosmopolitan liberalism.

All three of these regimes, therefore, have constructed self-identities in the modern world that revolve in important ways around opposition to and rivalry with the Western liberal democracies, and especially the United States. Their efforts at social self-construction seem in some respect to vindicate constructivist insights, but they also represent ideational projects entirely at odds with the actual agenda of post-Cold War Western elites.

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B. Reconstructed Rivalries

In the international arena, perhaps the biggest single problem for the post-competitive agenda of post-Cold War Western elites is that the two most powerful non-Western powers turned out to have very different things in mind. Nor was this coincidental. In fact, to the degree that this Western agenda exemplified two things each of which was anathema to the authoritarian oligarchies of the PRC and Russia — namely, worldwide convergence upon a model of liberal democracy, and a rules-based international order at the fulcrum of which sat the United States during a period of notable post-Cold War unipolarity — every step forward for this Western agenda amounted to an additional incentive for Beijing and Moscow to challenge it. Thus, in a dialectical tension, did the "unintended consequences" of Wendtian heterocephaly arise, as the West's post-Cold War triumph helped galvanize the grand strategy of its challengers. One can thus see here both some vindication of the insights of *actual* constructivist theory and also a cautionary tale about what can happen when a *pseudo*-constructivist enthusiasm encounters the actual complexities of a socially-constructed world.

From the outset, as foreshadowed in Putin's December 1999 "Millennium Message" upon arriving in the Kremlin, Russia was quick to leverage its relative economic and military-technological recovery into a vigorous anti-American competitive strategy during the 2000s and 2010s – a strategy explicitly premised upon trying to relitigate many of Russia's geopolitical losses, and notably unscrupulous in the extravagant provocations it has been willing to employ.

The Chinese situation is different in its details, but leads to a similar result: an authoritarian regime in control of a "near-peer" competitor of the United States has constructed a national identity with a revisionist geopolitical agenda and set itself on a clear course of competitive confrontation. A PRC characterized by its "soaring ambition for global status, prickly and insecure moralism, inflexible fear of admitting error, and tendency to rationalize and valorize the use of force in self-defense"[13] is now stepping out and flexing its muscles.

Scholars will no doubt debate for a long time precisely what factors, and in what admixture, set Beijing and Moscow upon their confrontational courses. For present purposes, however, it suffices to observe two things.

- First, while much of this revisionism was likely anyway — as Russia regained its feet after its debilitating 1990s, as growing PRC power allowed Beijing to act on long-held ambitions of geopolitical "return," and as both oligarchies invested in domestic narratives that tried to make up for their lack of democratic legitimacy by claiming to be uniquely able to deliver power and status to the country as a whole — the West's neoliberal triumphalism was a special irritant for these two regimes, helping goad the authoritarians forward in challenging the post-Cold War order.

- Second, these regimes' social construction of a new international environment of renewed competition and confrontation has today left the post-Cold War agenda of post-competitive neoliberal convergence in tatters.

This competitive resurgence had predictably bad effects upon Western elites' post-Cold War arms control and disarmament agenda. Despite the expectations raised by President Obama's Prague speech in April 2009 and the unfocused utopianism of the TPNW, for example, the return of great power competition, and the associated Chinese and Russian nuclear buildups, have dealt a tremendous blow to the world's hopes for nuclear disarmament. Making matters worse, the Kremlin's return to self-aggrandizing oppositionalism also led to a string of Russian arms control violations that now stand as indicia of untrustworthiness that will have to be overcome in any effort to build a *new* arms control framework with Moscow. (For its part, Beijing today shuns arms control negotiations entirely, focusing instead upon rapidly expanding and diversifying its nuclear arsenal.)

In the Middle East, despite the JCPOA's ambition to catalyze an improved relationship with Tehran, the JCPOA turned out to have in some respects made things worse, for Iran's behavior actually deteriorated. Far from being transformed by the catalytic power of Western engagement, after the lifting of sanctions and a degree of

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13 Christopher A. Ford, "Realpolitik with Chinese Characteristics: Chinese Strategic Culture and the Modern Communist Party-State," *in Understanding Strategic Cultures in the Asia Pacific* (Ashley Tellis, Allison Szalwinski, & Michael Wills, eds.) (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016), at 28, 28.

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JCPOA-associated re-integration into the global economy, Iran was left empowered and emboldened, a more dangerous regional actor than before. Not surprisingly, the prospect of *this* Iran building up its nuclear capabilities and positioning itself for potentially rapid future weaponization was entirely unacceptable to the United States. With putting pressure on Iran to agree to permanent nuclear limits ruled out by the terms of the deal itself, the JCPOA was thus doomed — and indeed, Washington left the deal.

Almost across the board, therefore, the optimistic and enthusiastic pseudo-constructivist post-Cold War agenda of world-remaking had run into trouble by the late 2010s — trouble catalyzed, in part, by the very progress that agenda had seemed for a time to have been making.

IV. Re-thinking It Through

But I think it is possible to learn from constructivist insights without replicating the self-defeating errors and overreach of the post-Cold War generation. The starting point for such lesson-learning should be to acknowledge complexity, both in the colloquial sense ("It's really complicated!") and in the more technical one associated with Complexity Theory. An appreciation for the deep complexity of the social environment teaches intellectual humility — a humility somewhat lacking, it would appear, in the agenda-focused pseudo-constructivism of the last generation — as we try to plot a course forward. With such humility, we may be able to admit the merit of constructivist theory and learn things that *do* help us advance a constructive agenda, yet to avoid the hubris of imagining that the complex adaptive social system that is our international environment can simply be willed into a new shape merely because we wish it so.

As an example, we have tried to some degree in the State Department to approach multilateral nonproliferation diplomacy as being an exercise in "storytelling." What does that mean? To begin with, this was in many ways a constructivist framing, inasmuch as

"the stories that participants in global affairs tell themselves and each other — stories about what is happening, why this is occurring, and what should be done about it — are, in a sense, constitutive of international politics."

Through efforts at persuasive "storytelling," we work to expand the set of diplomatic partners available to us in meeting proliferation threats by, in effect, reconstructing their understanding of these challenges and the opportunities available for their solution. What we do *not* assume, however, is that such storytelling provides a magic formula for change-making. Because diplomatic engagement is a *persuasive* project, it is an endeavor in which you may or may not actually succeed in changing someone else's mind or reshaping his perceptions, in which your counterpart is also trying to do the same thing to you, and in which *both* of you are also trying to influence third parties, each of whom *also* has agency (and most likely an agenda).

This complexity does not mean that one *cannot* be successful, for skilled diplomacy can often do a great deal. But it does mean that one should not oversell things, for in complex adaptive social systems there is not necessarily a linear or predictable relationship between inputs and outcomes. We must remember the ways in which such systems are (1) *capable* of responding to perturbations — including the deliberate and purposive perturbations of making foreign policy choices — by reconfiguring themselves, but yet (2) generally fairly stable and *resistant* to most perturbations and (3) notoriously unpredictable about *when* perturbation-induced transformation will occur and *what* the resulting new equilibrium will look like. This is not an argument against attempting the willful perturbations of policymaking, but it shows the need for patience, resilience, self-awareness, and intellectual humility in the policymaker.

To put it more abstractly, acknowledging the deep reality of social construction may involve a seemingly paradoxical juggling of the real and the unreal:

- It asks us to acknowledge the "unreal" quality of the constructed social world around us — unreal in the sense, at least, that its units and institutions do not exist as entirely exogenous *givens*, but rather do so only conditionally and temporarily, through endlessly renegotiated ongoing dynamics of *becoming*.

- Yet this insight into "unreality" must also be tempered with an appreciation for the stubborn *reality* of our social world, in the sense that its elements possess a sort of *inertia* that can make them quite resistant to our efforts at reconstruction, that *other* participants in its contested dynamics of "becoming" can effect

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purposive (or unintended) change too, and that in this arena in which questions of war and peace can be very much in play, the stakes for all concerned can be extremely high.

It is our challenge to appreciate both of these aspects at the same time.

It may be useful, in this respect, to draw some inspiration from the 3rd-Century Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, who can help us aspire to a *via media* between (i) clinging blindly to constructs and (ii) imagining that we can ignore them (or simplistically assume we can master them) simply *because* they are mere constructs. Nagarjuna's most famous work, the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, is known for its emphasis upon the concept of "emptiness," a word he uses in a technical (and not necessarily intuitive) sense. On one level, he argues against the idea that anything has an intrinsic essence — that is, some kind of self-existing, independent, a priori "thingness" that makes it fundamentally separate from and distinct from other things. Instead, Nagarjuna believes that the things that we instinctively tend to take *for* things, as it were, in some respects reciprocally *cause* each other, and thus depend to some degree upon their interrelationship in order to "exist." As a result, nothing has a truly independent existence, and all things are therefore "empty." (There is resonance here with constructivist insights that the agents and rules of the international system mutually constitute each other in dynamic processes of interaction.)

Yet it is also critical to Nagarjuna's construct that to say things are "empty" — in his technical sense — is *not* to deny them a meaningful existence either. In effect, things are both real *and* unreal at the same time. In his philosophy, it is important to be able to navigate appropriately between conceptual levels: to understand that things are fundamentally non-existent (in the sense that they lack intrinsic essence) *and* to be able to engage with them *as if* they were "truly" real where it is useful or necessary to do so. Nagarjuna repeatedly comes back to the distinction between ultimate truth and the "truth of worldly convention," which might also be thought of as

functional truth, between which we need to be able to navigate as appropriate. This, to Nagarjuna, appears to be a key to wisdom: "Without a foundation in the conventional truth / The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught."[14]

Informed by this need to be able to operate on such different levels at the same time, a policymaker alive to the insights of constructivism might thus draw both upon an understanding of the socially-constructed "unreality" of the international community *and* upon the "reality" of that social world's *de facto* solidity. (With apologies to the 13th Century Japanese priest Dogen,[15] the progression of policy insight may thus lead through an understanding of the unreality of things and then ultimately *back* to an appreciation of the ways in which they are meaningfully real nonetheless.) And indeed, this seems to be what the constructivist Peter Katzenstein suggested in 1996, when he noted that a scholar must be able to operate on multiple levels: for some purposes it remains "sensible to conceive of states as actors with unproblematic identities," but for others, you will miss critical things unless you "capture additional factors."[16]

And what is true in this respect for the academician surely also applies to the policymaker. After all, it is the contingency and changeability — that is, the "unreality" — of the features of our social environment that help give us potential power *as* policymakers: if everything were immutable, there would be no "space" in which policymaking could hope to effect change. At the same time, if those features had *no* solidity and consequence — that is, no "reality" — there would be little reason to try.

Cultivating the capacity for such multi-level vision may make us better policymakers, too. We can today clearly see that it was a mistake to conclude from the socially-constructed nature of our international world that we could simply will it into alternative forms — as if we were magicians casting a neoliberal spell — but it is still our job *as* policymakers to effect what beneficial change we can. We will be more effective in it if we can operate within the constraints of the complex concretenesses of the policy environment without losing a broader

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14 Nagarjuna*, The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Jay L. Garfield, translation and commentary) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), at 68 & 132-33.

15 See Dogen, "Mountains and Waters Sutra" (Arnold Kotler & Kazuaki Tanahashi, trans.), in Dogen, *Moon in a Dewdrop* (Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed.) (New York: North Point Press, 1985), at 107.

16 *The Culture of International Relations, supra*, at 30.

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perspective. We should avoid the example of Thales of Miletus, who as Plato's story goes, fell into a well because he was unwilling to take his eyes off the stars long enough to see what was in front of him. But we must not close our eyes to those stars, either.

V.   Walking the Via Media?

So how might it be possible for a policymaker to find the kind of Aristotelian Mean that is needed ― and that, given the potentially existential stakes, is perhaps *most* needed in the arena of arms control, disarmament, and great power competition?

To recap the discussion above and draw it more directly into policymaking, genuine constructivist insight encourages us to avoid reifying and essentializing the socially-constructed "things" of our international environment ― the nature and "rules" of the relationships between them, the realm of what is (or is not) imaginable in their interaction, and even the "given-ness" of the actors themselves — while yet also accepting the conditional, *functional* reality, the "stickiness," and the inertia associated with those same "things." The former allows us hope and provides a wellspring of optimism from which to draw energy in trying to improve the world. The latter helps reduce the risk that, in our enthusiasm for change, we cause unnecessary harm: it encourages more realistic expectations, it opens space for prudential readjustment as events unfold and preserves the option of recognizing and accommodating mistake or error, and it helps us understand the likelihood (and perhaps mitigate the impact) of negative feedback.

In this regard, it is worth remembering that thinkers as diverse (in political terms) as the radical sociologist Alvin Gouldner and the conservative commentator Thomas Sowell have contrasted the ideological instrumentalism of the modern elite intellectual class – a worldview in which the world's major problems can be solved by "public projects of social reconstruction" guided by the right policy experts ― with a more "tragic vision" that is suspicious of enthusiasm about the fundamental solubility of every social problem, accepts that there are often "firm limits on what politics can do,"[17] and sees policymaking as

often consisting of "trade-offs rather than solutions."[18] But it is also clear that neither Gouldner nor Sowell *opposed* change or rejected the possibility of ameliorative progress; the "tragic" part of their vision lies merely in its appreciation for human frailty and systemic complexity — an appreciation that, I would submit, may in fact help *lessen* the chance of genuinely tragic, unsought outcomes. Such a worldview is the cognitive antithesis of the Western neoliberal pseudo-constructivism we have been exploring, yet also arguably the viewpoint more consistent with a *genuinely* constructivist perspective.

It might surprise the reader to learn that much U.S. policymaking today is, in fact, informed by some of these insights. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the so-called "T" family of bureaus at the State Department, one could offer numerous examples:

- In our approach to great power competition with the PRC and Russia, it is explicit in our approach that these relationships have both competitive *and* cooperative aspects ― aspects which we have to manage at the same time as a sort of Aristotelean Mean. We must be competitive where their actions demand response, but we also seek cooperation wherever it remains available. We aim to problematize *our competitors'* strategies, but we also make clear that we seek opportunities to work together on shared interests.

- In administering national security export controls in response to the challenges presented by the PRC's strategy of "Military-Civil Fusion," we are explicitly seeking to balance the importance of continued cooperation with China for collective economic benefit against the need to take countermeasures against the theft and illicit diversion of sensitive technology in support of Beijing's geopolitical revisionism. We seek a policy answer that "lies between [the] asymptotes, and ― as in so many other arenas – we will all suffer if we cannot navigate a prudent middle way between such extremes."

- In response to the challenges presented by our "near-peer" competitors, we are increasingly forward-leaning in using arms transfers as a tool of

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[17] Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology: The Origins, Grammar, and Future of Ideology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), at 67, 71, & 79-84.

[18] Thomas Sowell*, Intellectuals and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), at 95-96.

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competitive strategy, as well as a means to boost the dynamism and resilience of the United States' National Security Innovation Base. Yet this, too, represents a balance, for we subject all transfers to detailed cost/benefit assessments, and refuse them where we judge they will undermine stability, contribute to proliferation, or undercut the security of key Allies and partners.

- With respect to the challenges presented by Iranian proliferation, we are unwilling to bet the nonproliferation farm on Tehran's miraculous self-transformation in return merely for our "outstretched hand." Instead, we are working, through our pressure campaign, to give the Iranian regime concrete reasons to negotiate with us on enduring solutions for the nuclear problems left unaddressed by the JCPOA. (We're not there yet, of course, but already our pressure has had the salutary side effect of reducing the resources Iran has available for supporting international terrorists and regional destabilization.)

- In the arms control arena, as the fate of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty makes clear, the United States is demonstrably willing to walk away from agreements when they fail to protect our security interests or are flagrantly violated by other parties. Yet as the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review emphasized, we also seek to negotiate *new* arms control frameworks that are effective, increase security and stability, and in which our counterparties live up to their obligations. Most obviously, always mindful of our obligations under Article VI of the NPT, we are today pursuing negotiations in good faith on effective measures to avert a nuclear arms race, and are leading the world in calling for "next generation arms control" with Russia and China.

- With respect to disarmament, we have recognized that genuine friends of disarmament "need to take the time to learn to 'speak' the security 'languages' of contemporary weapons possessors, and should prize deep engagement on the issue of disarmament 'conditions.'" To this end, based upon our review of the failures of much of the post-Cold War disarmament agenda, we have embarked upon the "Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament"

(CEND) initiative to restructure global disarmament discourse in more constructive directions. Through CEND, we are working to find pragmatic and functionally-oriented opportunities for dialogue and forward movement that build upon global disarmament hopes, but that channel this energy more usefully, through long-overdue attention to today's real (and worsening) problems of security and stability.

- Meanwhile, for so long as nuclear weapons must continue to exist, we work to preserve the capabilities needed to deter aggression and to prevent nuclear proliferation by friends and partners who, without our "nuclear umbrella," might feel they need such weapons themselves in the face of increasingly aggressive revisionism by Beijing and Moscow.

These policies are not necessarily radical departures from past U.S. policy. But perhaps that, too, is part of the point. A genuinely Nagarjunan approach – or at least one informed by a Gouldnerian or Sowellian "tragic perspective" – should presumably be leery of sweeping reformulations aspiring to steer policy in dramatic new directions on the strength of policymakers' conviction that they suddenly have unique insight into a new "Right Answer." Yet such an approach would not shy away, either, from new initiatives seeking to take advantage of at least the possibility of socially *re*-constructing better answers to contemporary problems.

VI. Conclusion

Hopefully, this paper will stimulate further thought and reflection. A hard look at these issues can encourage breadth of perspective and intellectual humility as we work to balance (1) the *need* to maintain security (which is grounded in an appreciation for the unavoidability of "conventional truth") with (2) the aspiration to transcend the need to maintain security in all of the uncomfortable and demanding ways that are required by today's security environment (which is grounded in the *higher* reality of social construction, and its potential for transformative change). As policymakers struggle to find such a path, they deserve our support and encouragement.

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