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The Nuclear Habit in the Public Mind

Policy Memo for November 2012 POSSE workshop in Vienna

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Jarrold Hayes' in his conceptual piece "Nuclear Disarmament and Stability in the Logic of Habit" draws upon the paper "The Logic of Habit in International Relations" by Ted Hopf, who in turn focuses on one of the four 'orientations' of social action distinguished by Max Weber. Hopf, following Weber, emphasizes that the logic of habit "precludes rationality, agency, and uncertainty" [Hopf]. Habits are the way to deal with limited intellectual capacity and they always reinforce the status quo.

Stemming from Hopf's assumptions, Hayes states that understanding of the role and importance of nuclear weapons in ensuring security are also a matter of habit. According to Hayes, "Americans cannot conceive of what US security looks like without nuclear weapons" [Hayes]. In fact, neither can Russians. The public seems to collectively perceive nuclear weapons as a primary source of national power due to the force of habit. Furthermore, Hopf's idea that security and cooperation dilemmas are actually "straightforward habitual routines of enmity and amity" [Hopf] seems to be relevant for Russian-U.S. relations.

Hayes claims, that disarmament is a challenge, as it "depends on a reflective rhetorical move" [Hayes], while habit is not reflective. In order to move towards the global zero, it is not enough to demonstrate that the rationale behind possession of large nuclear arsenals is outdated. The habit needs to become normatively unacceptable, to be overridden by conscious deliberation or to be shaken by an important exogenous event.

Meanwhile, habit cannot be solely blamed for people's unwillingness to support the global zero agenda. A lot depends on whether nuclear weapons and disarmament issues are framed through gains or losses. As a matter of fact, "loss aversion favors stability over change" [Kahneman and

Tversky], and nuclear disarmament basically means trading a more or less certain status quo for an uncertain future with possible race to reinvent the nuclear bomb.

The role of public in shaping nuclear policy should not be ignored, especially when it comes to disarmament agenda. Opinion polls offer an insight into the public opinion and at the same time might help shake the habit, as “polling, in asking a pointed question on a subject, at least offers the possibility of reflection” [Hayes]. True, opinion polls might prompt respondents to seriously think over the response options they are offered. On other hand, people may give the responses that are already preselected in their minds. People are ‘pushed’ towards responses that are ‘correct’ for their age or social background. Furthermore, both framing of questions in opinion polls and choice of response can be the results of habit. One should not forget that the public is simply accustomed to the world with nuclear weapons and might find it hard to imagine the world without them.

It would be interesting to trace the impact of important events (such as a crisis in bilateral relations or conclusion of an international treaty) on fluctuations in opinion polls. This impact might tell us to what extent exogenous events are able to break the habit, at least the habit prompting people to pick certain responses in opinion polls instead of reflecting about the alternatives. The distribution of priorities can also tell which argument in favor of disarmament may resonate with the public.

It remains to be seen whether results of opinion polls can be a clear indication of the public’s position with regards to the nuclear weapons and nuclear disarmament. A lot depends on how the issues are framed, so the results of polls carried out by reliable polling organizations should be contrasted with each other. Nevertheless, it makes sense to study opinion polls, in order to find

out whether there is a nuclear habit shared by Russian and U.S. public and whether in fact the public does collectively perceive nuclear weapons as a primary source of national power due to the force of habit. The results of such a study might offer some tentative conclusions about what exogenous events or normative arguments have a potential of breaking the habit and changing the status quo that it reinforces.

References

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