

14. Rethinking Nuclear Deterrence

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Deterrence as a Dynamic Concept

The history of the nuclear age shows that concepts of what it takes to have a sufficient nuclear weapons capability are far from immutable. Official U.S. thinking about nuclear weapons has changed many times during the 60 years since the first nuclear explosions in 1945. These changes reflected evolving assessments of what it would take to deter a well-armed adversary, the Soviet Union, from attacking the United States, its allies, or its vital interests. In turn, the reassessments resulted in changes in strategic planning, targeting, and the types and numbers of weapons in the U.S. stockpile, all of which are interrelated.

The trend until the Reagan administration was in the direction of more nuclear weapons. After that, the trend pointed downward. Now, the clarity of the bipolar U.S.-Soviet world has given way to the ambiguities and uncertainties of a world where international security is threatened by transnational terrorists, unstable and failed states, and regimes that scorn a world order based on broadly accepted principles. The dangers inherent in such a stew are magnified by easier access to nuclear technology, inadequately protected stockpiles of plutonium and highly enriched uranium, the growing availability of missiles worldwide, black market nuclear supply networks, and a trend toward

acquisition of “latent” nuclear weapons capabilities through the possession of the entire nuclear fuel cycle. We are at a tipping point in history.

The Task before Us

Now we need to rethink how, when, and whether nuclear deterrence works in present circumstances and to consider the implications for the U.S. nuclear arsenal. This is a moment in time which may be unique. The international situation changed radically through a failure to block a rapid increase in the number of nuclear weapons states. This is what a “tipping point” implies. But it is reasonable to hope for some success in preventing that outcome and to question: What is the need now for nuclear deterrence in certain situations where its effect is still thought to be of some importance? And are the unprecedented levels of destruction which could be wrought by even a few nuclear weapons a rational way of behaving in contemporary times? Examples are:

- the case of former adversaries (i.e., Russia)
- regional conflicts
- the case of potential adversaries (i.e., China)
- the case of other nuclear states
- the case of terrorist organizations.

Russia

President Bush stated on December 13, 2001, that “the greatest threats to both our countries come not from each other, or from other big powers in the world, but from terrorists who strike without warning, or rogue states who seek weapons of mass destruction.” This implies that deterrence now should be seen logically as applying to Russia’s peacetime behavior, not to the existential problem of preventing a strategic nuclear attack. Dissuasion, another term that the administration has used in its nuclear planning, may be more apt in describing

the current strategic problem. It should suffice to have a “responsive force” as a nuclear hedge against renewed hostility in the U.S.-Russian relationship. Ready-to-launch, operationally deployed nuclear forces should not be required between two countries that mutually declared in November 2001 that they do not regard each other as an enemy or threat.

Regional Conflicts

Three regions where simmering disputes have boiled over into open conflict and could do so again are the Middle East, South Asia, and Northeast Asia. In the Middle East, the United States has been involved on at least three occasions in events carrying nuclear overtones. In 1973, the Nixon administration put U.S. nuclear forces on alert to send a warning signal to the Soviets that they should not intervene in the Middle Eastern war of that year. Prior to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Secretary of State James Baker hinted at the use of nuclear weapons if Saddam Hussein used chemical or biological weapons. A stated if unsubstantiated reason for the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was to eliminate the possibility that Iraq would build nuclear weapons. The dispute with Iran over its nuclear programs has evoked some media and even official discussion of air attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities, like the 1981 Israeli attack that destroyed Iraq’s Osirak reactor.

In such a volatile region, where nuclear weapons have figured in several disputes, it is easy to conclude that U.S. nuclear weapons might exercise some deterrent effect. If a war between a still conventionally armed Iran and the United States were to occur, for example, U.S. nuclear weapons looming in the background might suggest to Tehran that the war should be limited and terminated as soon as possible. But it might also suggest to Tehran that use of terrorist proxies and the oil weapon would be the best way to continue the conflict. Asymmetrical warfare is very difficult for nuclear deterrence to deal with. In fact, nuclear deterrence would probably be less effective than

other actions that the United States is capable of taking in the economic and diplomatic spheres. Under any circumstance, it is difficult to envision the need for nuclear weapons on alert status with prompt launch procedures being relevant. A responsive force with a much-reduced number of warheads relative to today's posture will be more than adequate for any conceivable circumstances.

South Asia presents even fewer scenarios where U.S. nuclear weapons would deter or dissuade a protagonist from taking actions that the United States wanted to prevent. Obviously, the U.S. nuclear arsenal did nothing to dissuade either India or Pakistan from going nuclear. The only plausible situations in which U.S. nuclear deterrence might come into play in South Asia is in the context of a radical Islamist government in Pakistan gaining control of its nuclear program or reassurance to India in the event of a serious dispute with China. These contingencies are not out of the question, but the effect of U.S. nuclear deterrence is apt to be marginal in either case. Again, economic and diplomatic actions and conventional armed force, not nuclear, are likely to be brought into play.

A crisis in Northeast Asia has some potential for erupting into a nuclear conflict. Deterrence in support of a containment strategy is essentially where things stand now. The three U.S. goals are presumably to deter North Korea from invading South Korea, to deter North Korea from launching missile attacks against Japan or South Korea, and to deter North Korea from using nuclear weapons under any circumstances. Actual U.S. use of nuclear weapons, except in retaliation for a nuclear attack, would probably be constrained by the opinions of all of North Korea's neighbors. In the event, North Korea may turn out to be more of a "virtual" or a "latent" nuclear weapons state than one that deploys an array of nuclear strike forces.

China

A conflict with China over Taiwan cannot be ruled out, but U.S. use of nuclear weapons would not be the first step in an attempt to con-

vince China to stop military action and, most likely, nuclear weapons would not enter the picture at all except in the form of mutual deterrence. A credible U.S. deterrent against the current threat of China in the straits can be managed with a reserve force and many fewer warheads than the current levels.

Japan has set great store by the U.S. “nuclear umbrella.” The presence of that umbrella has made it easier for Japan (and other allies) to continue to renounce the building of nuclear weapons and has thwarted a nuclear arms race between China and Japan. This effect does not require operationally deployed U.S. nuclear warheads. A responsive force should suffice, particularly in circumstances where China’s nuclear forces remain at relatively low levels.

Other Nuclear States

For the foreseeable future, there are no “big powers” that U.S. nuclear forces need to deter, dissuade, or defeat. France, Israel, India, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom have nuclear weapons but are not our current adversaries, and their nuclear forces are much smaller than those of the United States. None of these countries are adversaries of the other nuclear superpower, Russia, which like the United States can meet potential security needs exclusively with a much smaller reserve force.

Terrorist Organizations

The administration and independent experts acknowledge that nuclear deterrence has little effect on suicidal, fanatical terrorists. There are Islamic fundamentalists who welcome martyrdom. Otherwise, no role for U.S. nuclear weapons in any mode is very likely in the case of terrorists. The best way of blocking nuclear-armed terrorism is to prevent nuclear weapons or materials from escaping the control of responsible governments. It is not nuclear deterrence but activities such as the Cooperative Threat Reduction program that are key to preventing nuclear terrorism.

Ballistic Missile Defense

Current discussions about U.S.-Russian missile defense cooperation should be encouraged and given sustained high-level support leading to developing cooperative multilateral ballistic missile defense and early warning systems. This is what Presidents Bush and Putin proposed at their 2002 summit meeting in Moscow. In an environment where total global numbers of warheads deployed on ballistic missiles are heading downward toward zero, it would make sense to have such joint defensive systems among cooperating states. It would help to stabilize their own strategic nuclear relationships with each other and would link them in an effort to thwart the ambitions of noncooperating states and would-be cheaters.