

Open forum: Close encounter with nuclear deterrence

Robert Green

More than 20 years after the end of the Cold War, civilization is still held hostage by over 20,000 nuclear weapons held by the five recognized nuclear-weapon states as well as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), India, Israel and Pakistan. Underlying and driving this global security crisis is the doctrine of nuclear deterrence, cited by the United States, the United Kingdom and France as the indispensable justification for maintaining their nuclear arsenals. Nuclear deterrence must therefore be challenged and alternatives offered if there is to be any serious prospect of eliminating nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons have no military use. Their uniquely indiscriminate, long-term health effects, including genetic damage, on top of almost unimaginable explosive violence, make them the most unacceptable terror devices yet invented—far worse than chemical or even biological weapons.

Yet nuclear deterrence has become an accepted and entrenched doctrine of national security. For British and French leaders, the 1956 Suez fiasco and their crumbling empires drove them to clutch at nuclear deterrence to sustain their great power status and influence. The French chose to develop, at massive cost, their own nuclear weapons and delivery systems. The British decided they could not afford this, so opted for dependence on the United States in a bargain sealed between Macmillan and Kennedy in 1962. The price for Polaris and its successors has proved exorbitant in terms of the damage done to the United Kingdom's independence, reputation and true security interests. Meanwhile, the Manhattan Project created a secret nuclear, scientific and military complex in the United States, whose engine and justification was the unopposed dogma of nuclear deterrence.

When the Berlin Wall came down, and Soviet President Gorbachev was briefly able to break the grip of Cold War security thinking, a window of opportunity opened to end the nuclear nightmare. However, the threat of communism was soon replaced by the threat of "Islamic fundamentalism" and conflict in the Middle East, despite one major source of this conflict being Israel's secret acquisition of nuclear weapons.

I was broken out of my pro-nuclear indoctrination by the 1991 Gulf War, and the fear that attacks from Iraqi Scud missiles armed with chemical warheads might provoke Israel to

Robert Green, Commander, Royal Navy (Retired), served in the British Royal Navy from 1962–1982 and flew in Buccaneer nuclear strike aircraft as well as anti-submarine helicopters equipped with nuclear depth bombs. He is now Co-Director of the Peace Foundation's Disarmament and Security Centre, Christchurch, New Zealand. This article is based on his recent book *Security without Nuclear Deterrence* (Christchurch, Astron Media and Disarmament and Security Centre, 2010).

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respond with a nuclear strike on Baghdad. A de facto nuclear state was being directly attacked by a non-nuclear state, and exactly the kind of attack that Israel's nuclear status was supposed to deter had occurred. Meanwhile, the Irish Republican Army had just missed wiping out the entire British War Cabinet with a mortar-bomb attack from a van in Whitehall. Nuclear deterrence had failed in cases that proved to be a foretaste of the primary security threats facing the world today.

For the United States—supported by France and the United Kingdom—however, the 1991 Gulf War and Gorbachev's fall from power simply prompted a drive for a new justification for nuclear weapons: countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Paradoxically, the 11 September 2001 terror attacks on the United States led to a growing acceptance that nuclear deterrence will not work against "rogue regimes" and other extremists armed with WMD—now the primary threat to global security. This body blow to nuclear deterrence was admitted in the 2002 US National Security Strategy, but it was replaced by a policy of pre-emptive strikes, using nuclear weapons if necessary.¹ The unverifiable claim by nuclear-weapon states that nuclear deterrence averts war was thereby cynically stood on its head. A more potent prescription for inciting WMD proliferation could barely be imagined—quite apart from its assault on morality and international humanitarian law.

There is a fundamental, insoluble credibility problem at the heart of nuclear deterrence. It has been demonstrated to devastating effect that the possession of nuclear weapons does not deter conventional weapon attacks from states or from non-state actors. Indeed, nuclear deterrence even undercuts the political stability its proponents claim it creates: the opportunity to abandon the doctrine of mutual assured destruction at the 1986 Reagan–Gorbachev summit in Iceland was defeated by the vested interests of the US military–industrial complex and the desire of the US to extend nuclear deterrence to its allies. Nuclear deterrence provokes arms races, confrontational rhetoric and reckless posturing (all of which it is purportedly designed to prevent), which leads not to increased security but to some of the world's most intractable security problems (witness the DPRK and Iran).

Nuclear deterrence can be seen as a stimulus for spreading nuclear weapons. Israel's success in convincing France and then the United States to acquiesce in its drive for a uniquely opaque variant of nuclear deterrence provided a clear pretext and incitement for Iraq, and then Iran, to acquire their own arsenals. Meanwhile, South Asian rivals India and Pakistan each naively attempted to apply nuclear deterrence dogma to their security policies. The United States' nuclear technology deal with India and China's determination to mirror this deal with Pakistan threaten the non-proliferation regime with collapse under the weight of double standards and discriminatory rules. All three cases of states pursuing nuclear ambitions outside the international non-proliferation regime have intensified and encouraged regional insecurities and arms races.

In 1996 the International Court of Justice confirmed that the threat (let alone the use) of nuclear weapons would generally be illegal.² There is a deep moral deception underlying nuclear deterrence. Thankfully, citizens are continuing to campaign for the abolition of nuclear weapons, and for a Nuclear Weapons Convention to underpin their abolition.

The delegitimization of nuclear deterrence serves as a springboard to seek safer, more effective alternatives for our security.³ The key is to see nuclear disarmament as a security-building process, in which nuclear weapons are an unusable liability. A top priority is therefore to persuade the Russian Federation and the United States to stand down a combined total of over 4,000 strategic nuclear weapons, which are currently ready to be launched within minutes.⁴ When Russia and the United States profess to have ended the Cold War and are collaborating in the so-called war on terror, this anachronistic arrangement is driven by the overriding imperative to sustain nuclear deterrence dogma, even at the expense of risking catastrophic damage to all humanity and the planet itself. Standing down Russian and US nuclear forces would reduce the chance of an accidental or unauthorized launch of a nuclear weapon.

In light of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) huge conventional military advantage over Russia, there is a pressing need to provide Russia with incentives to become less dependent on its nuclear arsenal for its security. Western Europe has little to fear from nuclear blackmail on the part of the Russian Federation, therefore it is in NATO's security interest to encourage a major shift to a non-nuclear NATO defence strategy.

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom has struggled to find an international role since losing its empire. As the first medium-sized power to decide that it had to have nuclear weapons, it was the role model for France, Israel, India and Pakistan. The UK nuclear arsenal is now the smallest of the P5, and is deployed in only one system, Trident, on relaxed alert of several days' notice for use. In my recent study, I predict the consequences if the British government, struggling with an urgent need for massive defence cuts, decided to reject nuclear deterrence:

The first anti-nuclear 'breakout' by one of the P5 would be sensational, and would transform the nuclear disarmament debate overnight. In NATO, the UK would wield unprecedented influence in leading the drive for a non-nuclear strategy—which must happen if NATO is to sustain its cohesion. It would create new openings for shifting the mindset particularly in the US and France, and heavily influencing India, Israel, Pakistan and others intent on obtaining nuclear weapons. Moreover, it would open the way for a major reassessment by Russia and China of their nuclear strategies, for all nuclear forces to be de-alerted, and for multilateral negotiations to start on a Nuclear Weapons Convention.⁵

Finding our way back from the nuclear abyss, on the edge of which nuclear deterrence has held us hypnotized and terrorized for sixty years, will not be easy. As with all major advances

in human rights and justice, the engine for shifting the mindset has to come from civil society. I conclude:

As with nuclear deterrence, three of the leading proponents of slavery were the establishments of the US, the UK and France, who tried to sustain their immoral and unlawful assertion that slavery was a 'necessary evil' for which there was 'no alternative'. They failed, because courageous ordinary British, American and French citizens mobilised unstoppable public and political support for their campaign to replace slavery with more humane, lawful and effective ways to create wealth. The analogy holds for nuclear deterrence, which can and must be discarded for more humane, lawful and safer security strategies if civilisation and the Earth's ecosystems are to survive.⁶

Notes

1. The scenarios for potential pre-emptive nuclear strikes were outlined in the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff publication, *Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations*, 15 March 2005.
2. See International Court of Justice, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, Advisory Opinion of 8 July 1996.
3. The legal arguments are well documented in the World Court Project (see the Lawyer's Committee on Nuclear Policy website, at <lcnp.org/wcourt>), and there are numerous examples of citizen campaigns for the abolition of nuclear weapons and a Nuclear Weapons Convention, an enforceable treaty to underpin it.
4. Bruce G. Blair, Harold A. Feiveson and Frank von Hippel, 1997, "Taking Nuclear Weapons off Hair-Trigger Alert", *Scientific American*, November.
5. Robert Green, 2010, *Security without Nuclear Deterrence*, Christchurch, Astron Media and Disarmament and Security Centre, p. 245.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 258.