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Thinking About Deterrence: Credibility and Warfighting

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by Clifton W. Sherrill

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In the February issue, Wade Huntley addressed the familiar topic of the proper role of nuclear weapons in America's nuclear force structure.^[1] Rehashing the decades-old conflict over whether nuclear weapons require a war-fighting foundation to be effective deterrents or whether they deter through the simple fact of being, Huntley provides a modern version of the existential deterrent argument. Working from the assumption that deterrence was successful during the Cold War, he questions taking any action with respect to the U.S. nuclear force structure with the singular exception of reduction.^[2] For existentialists, diversifying the nuclear arsenal to include creating "new low-yield, earth-penetrating, and damage-limiting nuclear weapons suitable for tactical, first strike missions" is unacceptable precisely because it means endowing nuclear weapons with war-fighting purpose. By assigning such purpose to nuclear weapons, the argument goes, the firebreak between conventional weaponry and nuclear arms is diminished and decision-makers may be more apt to actually use nuclear weapons. Accordingly, for adherents of this school of thought, nuclear weaponry must be limited to massive doomsday devices with no use besides deterring wholesale strategic nuclear exchanges. This argument is fatally flawed in that it misunderstands the nature of deterrence as a scientific rather than a psychological phenomenon. In the current security environment, American policymakers must repeal the intentional retarding of the American nuclear force and enhance deterrent credibility by planning for tactical nuclear use.

The Fallacy of Existential Deterrence

Huntley argues that whereas the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons was supposedly justified during the Cold War under the logic that they might be used to provide escalation dominance so as to prevent the emergence of strategic nuclear exchange, no such justification exists today. In Huntley's words, "Weinberger's arguments on U.S. nuclear policies were focused on the Soviet nuclear threat, which evaporated with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union." This statement suggests a fundamental flaw in the argument. If nuclear weapons threaten, and impliedly deter, simply through existence, then the fact that Russia maintains a large nuclear arsenal, including on-going production of new SS-27 Topol-M ICBMs and a large tactical nuclear inventory marked by uncertainty, means that the threat has hardly "evaporated." Their mere existence must constitute a threat. Conversely, if the "threat" is based on intentions rather than simple existence of nuclear weapons, then deterrence must be likewise qualified to consider intentions. Accordingly, there must be some credible intent to use nuclear weapons under certain circumstances if they are to be effective deterrents. To be credible, logic demands there be some identifiable purpose behind this use. As an indiscriminate city-busting targeting doctrine hardly seems credible in deterring the types of activities the United States seeks to deter in the current environment, a counter-force application would seem appropriate.

Thus, to meaningfully and effectively deter, nuclear weapons require some counter-force (war-fighting) purpose reflected in their design.

A response to the argument above might hold that instead of reshaping our nuclear forces to provide credibility, we might instead rely on conventional superiority for all deterrence missions as no taboo surrounds conventional weapons. A conventional response would thus have greater credibility and provide a superior deterrent. The trouble with this policy is that nuclear weapons are often perceived to have capabilities far in excess of conventional weapons. With the advances brought about through precision guided munitions, laser targeting, and deep penetration primaries, this perceived gap may in truth be quite small for many purposes. However, because deterrence is a psychological event, perception is more important than fact. If a tyrant believes that nuclear weapons are superior, then for the purposes of deterrence, they are.

Moreover, with the global reordering following the collapse of the Soviet Union, attempting to drawn analogies from the Cold War to the present context for purposes of justifying force structure is inherently flawed. Huntley admits this only after attempting to exploit Weinberger's statements in a comparative manner. He then describes the Nuclear Posture Review's outlined shift in force structure, which includes a major reduction in deployed strategic warheads and the possible development of much smaller yield tactical warheads, as requiring "an unprecedented offensive expansion of U.S. nuclear policy." While the Bush administration directly and honestly admits that preemption is an option, characterizing this as an unprecedented offensive expansion is erroneous. As is stated in the National Security Strategy, this is not a shift or a new policy. Indeed, the U.S. refusal to adopt a no-first-use policy was a major underpinning of the credibility of NATO throughout the Cold War. For nearly four decades, diverse tactical nuclear weapons were a part of the deployed American arsenal. If new generation tactical nuclear weapons can cause rogue states or transnational actors to think twice about the advisability of investing major resources into a weapons program that might be rendered ineffective or eradicated in full by well placed tactical nuclear strikes, then they are reprising the role of providing strategic security played by their larger cousins during the Cold War.

Ultimately, deterrence should never be the concluding chapter of national security strategy. As long as it seems to work, then including deterrence as a prominent aspect of defense planning is prudent; however, should deterrence fail, we must not be caught unprepared. Indeed, even if planning for deterrence's failure were to diminish the likelihood of deterrence's success, we might reasonably consider the risks sufficiently grave to nonetheless partake in such planning. Fortunately, this is not the case, as the very act of planning and structuring forces for post-deterrence use enhances the credibility of deterrence. Thus, planning for nuclear use works synergistically with ensuring the most credible deterrent possible. Accordingly, alarmism over reducing the gap between nuclear and conventional weaponry fails to appreciate that the reduction enhances deterrence and thus diminishes the probability of actually having to use either tool.

Internationalism is a Means, Not an End

Huntley warns that Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments and related assurances might be broken should the United States use tactical nuclear weapons in a preemptive strike to eliminate an adversary's chemical, biological or radiological weapons program. In this respect, Huntley is unquestionably correct. Should this in fact come to pass, then so be it. The NPT is a Cold War treaty that has failed to prevent states desiring nuclear weapons from pursuing them. Israel, India, and Pakistan never bothered to join. North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Libya all pursued nuclear weapons programs despite NPT promises. The NPT's verification and enforcement regime has been questionable at best, as evidenced by the surprising scope of the now public Libyan program, the inability to detect North Korea's highly enriched uranium (HEU) weapons program, and the blatant Iranian violations with respect to uranium enrichment programs.

Coupled with the divestiture of chemical and biological weapons capability, these assurances leave the United States wholly reliant on conventional deterrence to forestall a non-nuclear power's use of CBW. Developing new tactical nuclear weapons and providing them with a role in American military doctrine would enhance deterrence compared to stubborn adherence to the NPT.

Rather than constraining American security options due to concerns over violating an ineffectual treaty left over from a different security environment, emphasis should be placed on counter-proliferation efforts such as export control regimes and the Proliferation Security Initiative. Such programs trade diplomatic rhetoric for practical effective measures. Notwithstanding the traditional citation of international norms or treaty commitments, the reason that more states do not have nuclear weapons is the difficulty of obtaining fissile material in sufficient quantities. In that ensuring compliance with NPT promises requires a united international front, and given the resentment over American hegemony that has led to reluctance on the part of some to cooperate with American-led multilateral initiatives, we lack the ability to prevent proliferation within the confines of the NPT.

In the same vein, Huntley asserts that preemption is contrary to a common interpretation of Article 51 of the UN Charter.^[3] Again, this is undeniably so. Of course, others would hold that in the era of weapons of mass destruction preemption is an increasingly important means of self-defense. As such, the distinction between preventive war and preemptive war has become quite blurred. Characterizing preemption as dependent on the "imminence" of the threat merely shifts the semantic debate rather than answering it. Given the lack of reaction time and the gravity of potential harm, the concept of self-defense is rendered empty if imminence is held to mean missiles are on the launch-pad. Thus, is actual possession of a nuclear weapon sufficient to qualify as "imminent," or is pursuit of a nuclear weapons program via HEU activities enough? The clear answer is that objective capabilities and force posture alone cannot reasonably define "imminent." Instead the more subjective analysis of intention must accompany and inform an assessment of objective capabilities if we are to derive meaning from imminent. Establishing universal criteria to establish the imminence of a threat is no more possible than establishing objective criteria for determining a case of individual assault.^[4]

Huntley offers a six factor approach provided by Brad Roberts as a potential set of objective criteria for preemption, consisting of

1. the target state has threatened use of NBC weapons against the United States;
2. such weapons were acquired in violation of international law;
3. there is a concern regarding "broader U.S. regional security guarantees and/or power stability;"
4. the President obtains Congressional approval;
5. the United States obtains UN Security Council approval and approval of "any relevant regional organization;" and
6. the preemptive attack is a last resort, proportional, and has a reasonable chance of success.^[5]

The inherent difficulty of such an approach is obvious. With respect to condition one, what constitutes a "threat?" Is the Chinese General Xiong Guangkai's question regarding the will of the United States to trade Los Angeles for Taiwan a threat?^[6] Are North Korea's state broadcasts slandering the United States and threatening dire consequences sufficient to constitute a threat? As to condition two, why would this be relevant? Iran could withdraw from the NPT pursuant to Article X and no longer be bound within three months.^[7] If it then purchased nuclear weapons from Pakistan, another non-party to the NPT, what difference would it make that these weapons were "legally" acquired if the United States perceived hostile Iranian intentions? Moreover, defining what is legal under international law is an exercise of sovereign subjectivity in most cases of consequence in the first place. The subjectivity of the third condition is patent and no

more universal than the Bush administration's approach assailed by Huntley. Expecting states to agree on such "concern" is unsound. This problem is magnified in condition five, requiring UN Security Council approval. Rarely will the respective self-perceived spheres of influence of permanent Security Council members not be in conflict so as to permit consensus approval of preemptive strikes. However, under this approach, not only is Security Council approval required, but also that of "any relevant regional organization." As such approval would often lead to increasing the threat to small local powers, reticence to provide approval should be expected. In sum, this proposal is unworkable in that it stands to eliminate any possibility of actually implementing preemption. Of course, this may well be the intent.

International regimes and institutions are not ends in themselves. Rather, American participation in and recognition of such entities is a means of ensuring security. When these means no longer succeed, U.S. policy-makers must reassess the value of continued participation. Subordinating U.S. security concerns to continued good standing in international organizations and to the approval of global opinion is an abdication of sovereign responsibility. While multilateral support is obviously desirable, if such fails to materialize when necessary, as has been the case in the post Cold War era more often than not, American leaders must retain the option of unilateral action. Huntley argues that the Bush doctrine "if adopted by all countries" would result in a situation in which "states would be restrained in action only by considerations of relative power." That this is the essence of the most influential theory of international relations historically and a descriptively accurate portrait of what is occurring irrespective of the Bush doctrine is obvious.

Preemption of Rogues and Terrorists

Huntley argues that rogue states have by and large been quite rational, seeking only to deter a U.S. attack upon themselves. If in fact such leaders are rational, then the obvious strategy for such leaders would be to forego WMD programs, as has Libya, so as to avoid any pretense for an American "imperialist" attack. Yet, while rogue states undoubtedly seek to avoid attacks on themselves, they also seek to further the agenda that earned them the title "rogue" in the first place. Regimes such as those in North Korea and Iran clearly place priority on pursuing an aggressive agenda counter to American interests. Should the United States adopt a neo-isolationist posture, we might avoid North Korean or Iranian attacks in the near term. Unfortunately, we would also see our position in the world, as well as that of our friends and allies, deteriorate. In the globalized economy of the high-tech twenty-first century, isolationism is unacceptable. American must remain engaged in the world and protect our interests globally.

Distinguishing between terrorists and rogue states is proper, and as Huntley points out, deterring non-state terrorists may be significantly more difficult. Yet simply because it may be more difficult does not mean it will be impossible, nor does it mean that we should abandon attempts to do so. Terrorists who desire WMD will typically need a base for training, production, support, planning, and accessing funds among other things. Holding out the possibility of U.S. preemptive strikes may serve as a major disincentive to states that might otherwise permit terrorist organizations to set up shop. It is highly unlikely that a transnational group could build the infrastructure to house a hardened below-ground NBC facility without the knowledge of the host state. By making clear the American will to deny transnational terrorists groups access to NBC weapons, states may choose to avoid involvement and deny such groups the safe haven desired.

One strategy sure to meet with failure is that commonly advanced of "dealing with the root cause of terrorism." Typically, root-cause advocates suggest placing the grievances of terrorists high on the international agenda and working to a negotiated solution in the form of compromise. Often this involves reference to an unjust global economy and platitudes regarding eliminating poverty and ensuring a more equal distribution of wealth. However noble, ending world poverty is a goal beyond the means of the United States. Moreover, adopting this root-cause strategy will result in the proliferation of terrorism just as paying ransom results in spurring new kidnappings. Numerous groups are victims of injustice across the world, yet most do not turn to terrorism. If we

elevate the grievances of terrorists to higher priority items, we signal these other groups that the path to resolving injustice is through terrorism. National security and moral leadership in the war against terrorism would be diminished by such policies far more than through creation of resentment via preemption.

Conclusion

In the end, Huntley argues that updating our nuclear force posture to reflect the changed security environment will trap us in the security dilemma where defensive precautions are perceived as threats leading to an international arms race and diminished security. Perhaps this may occur with some actors; however, the facts clearly demonstrate that there are others who are upgrading their own forces regardless of what we do. Official Chinese military budgets have steadily increased by ten percent or more for almost fifteen consecutive years.[8] A clandestine North Korean nuclear weapons program has been underway despite the Agreed Framework. Iran continues to work on acquiring nuclear weapons despite the violations highlighted by IAEA inspections. Terrorist organizations seek WMD by whatever means possible. If we are to stand pat for fear of provoking others (Russia?) while this parade of despotic regimes and common thugs steadily progresses on the path to obtaining or increasing nuclear arsenals, we will have failed both our own and future generations in a catastrophic manner.

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About the Author

Dr. Clifton W. Sherrill is an adjunct professor at Florida State University and a practicing attorney. He holds a Master's of Science in Defense and Strategic Studies and a Ph.D. in International Relations in addition to a Juris Doctor. His work focuses on American deterrence policy and nuclear strategy, particularly with respect to the Asian-Pacific.

References

1. Wade Huntley, "Unthinking the Unthinkable: U.S. Nuclear Policy and Asymmetric Threats," *Strategic Insights* 3, no. 2 (Feb. 2004). See also, Barry Zellen, "Rethinking the Unthinkable: Nuclear Weapons and the War on Terror," *Strategic Insights* 3, no. 1 (Jan. 2004).
2. Whether deterrence was "successful" is of course an unknown. While the United States and the Soviet Union avoided direct and open warfare, proving that such was a result of deterrence policy is practically impossible. What is clear is that the logic of mutual assured destruction—the very logic underpinning existential deterrence—was never embraced by Soviet leaders and was never wholly accepted by American military planners. See e.g. Aaron L. Friedberg, "A History of U.S. Strategic 'Doctrine' - 1945 to 1980," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 4 (Dec. 1980): 37-71; Leon Sloss and Marc Dean Millot, "U.S. Nuclear Strategy in Evolution," *Strategic Review* (Winter 1984): 20-21; and Colin S. Gray, *Strategic Studies and Public Policy: The American Experience* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 131.
3. Article 51 of the UN Charter guarantees states the right of self-defense.
4. For example, under Florida state law, "An "assault" is an intentional, unlawful threat by word or act to do violence to the person of another, coupled with an apparent ability to do so, and doing some act which creates a well-founded fear in such other person that such violence is imminent." Florida Statutes 784.011. The more obvious analogy of under what conditions individual self-defense is an accepted reason for use of force is of limited illustrative use here as it typically

refers to "imminence" of harm.

5. Brad Roberts, "NBC-Armed Rogues: Is There a Moral Case for Preemption?," in Elliott Abrams, ed., *Close Calls: Intervention, Terrorism, Missile Defense, and 'Just War' Today* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics & Public Policy Center, 1998).

6. Cited in Barton Gellman, "U.S. and China Nearly Came to Blows in 1996," *Washington Post*, June 21, 1998, A1.

7. Article X, Section 1 of the NPT holds "Each party shall in exercising its national sovereignty have the right to withdraw from the Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country. It shall give notice of such withdrawal to all other Parties to the Treaty and to the United Nations Security Council three months in advance. Such notice shall include a statement of the extraordinary events it regards as having jeopardized its supreme interests."

8. See "Chinese Plan Increases Spending on Military, Poor," *Charleston Post and Courier*, March 6, 2003, noting that the 9.6 percent increase in the 2003 budget is the first year below double digit percentage increases in 13 years. The official Chinese military budget increase for 2004 is pegged at 11.6 percent. See "Western Media Make Random Guess at China's Military Spending," *People's Daily*, March 20, 2004.