

Reaffirming the Utility of Nuclear Weapons

Bradley A. Thayer and Thomas M. Skypek

© 2013 Bradley A. Thayer and Thomas M. Skypek

A defining aspect of the present period in international politics is the lack of attention paid to nuclear weapons by United States' policymakers. To the extent these weapons are addressed, it is to consider significant reductions in the size of the US nuclear arsenal, to perhaps as few as 300 deployed strategic nuclear weapons, to advance the administration's nuclear disarmament goal. This push for reductions is part of a broader call for major reductions by organizations such as Global Zero.¹ We argue that such reductions are strategically risky, signal weakness, and invite challenges from US foes and worry among US allies.

The time has come to state plainly—nuclear disarmament is an unpleasant dream that would jeopardize US security, make the world safe for conventional war, and undermine global stability. Further reductions in America's nuclear arsenal have the potential to embolden aggression against the interests of the United States and its allies, as well as to encourage proliferation.

The United States' strategic amnesia about the important role of nuclear weapons in international politics is unique to Washington—it is clearly not shared by the leadership in Iran, Russia, or China. Moreover, it stands in stark contrast to the Cold War period where nuclear deterrence and the nuclear arsenal served as the strategic lodestar for the national security policies of the United States. Long forgotten are the days when American statesmen understood that, in order to advance its interests and deter aggression, Washington needed a credible, flexible, and responsive nuclear arsenal.

Given their disappearance from national security debates, one could be forgiven for thinking nuclear weapons have no strategic value for the United States, and can be eliminated as the administration desires without cost or penalty. Only in the United States are nuclear weapons seen as *passé*, associated with the tools of the Cold War. Other nuclear and near-nuclear states see them as very useful tools of statecraft, today just as in the past.

This neglect of the US nuclear enterprise has been comprehensive, cumulative, and caused some novel problems: the aging of the nuclear force structure, the dead-end career paths for Air Force and Navy officers, the lack of attention paid to deterrence theory and its complexities by think tanks and academics, the retirement of much of the workforce, and with it the loss of knowledge and experience.

1 For example, see Remarks by President Barack Obama, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered; *Global Zero Action Plan*, February 2010, Global Zero Initiative, http://static.globalzero.org/files/docs/GZAP_6.0.pdf.

The United States has not addressed these problems with the force and urgency they require. The failure to solve these problems has been bipartisan, with both Congress and the White House sharing the blame. This article explains why nuclear weapons matter for the United States. To accomplish this, we explain the traditional roles of nuclear weapons for US foreign and defense policies—deterrence and coercion—and explain why these roles remain relevant.

Why Nuclear Weapons Matter for the United States

Nuclear weapons matter for purposes of deterrence and coercion—two of the major tools in the toolbox of the United States to advance and protect its interests in international politics. For deterrence purposes, nuclear weapons matter for five reasons. The first of these is deterrence of a nuclear attack on the US homeland. Nuclear weapons make the costs of such an attack prohibitive due to the consequences of nuclear retaliation. As in the Cold War, the United States is a target, and, just as then, it has enemies who wish its destruction. Nuclear weapons deter enemies such as al Qaeda who would deliberately attack the United States as well as countries like China that might be tempted to attack the US homeland as the result of escalation from a crisis (e.g., Taiwan in 1995-96).

Second, nuclear weapons—both strategic and tactical—allow the United States to extend deterrence credibly, effectively, and relatively inexpensively to its allies. This provides them with security and removes their incentive to acquire nuclear weapons. The United States' extended deterrent is one of the most important nonproliferation mechanisms Washington possesses. If the United States significantly cuts its nuclear arsenal, and certainly if it disarms, powerful proliferation incentives will return for allies of the United States.

As is regularly on display in the East and South China Seas, the United States faces an increasingly hostile China.² Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi observed at an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meeting in 2010, “China is a big country, and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact,”³ an argument Thucydides made 2,400 years ago in the Melian Dialogue—the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must.⁴

If history is a guide, as China's power continues to grow, so too will its ambition and its ability to advance its objectives. These will progressively conflict with those of the United States and its allies for three reasons: the numerous and dangerous territorial conflicts China has with its neighbors, which may escalate to involve the United States; the conflicting grand strategies of China and the United States; and the changing distribution of power between Beijing and Washington. The growth of Chinese military power will require a credible extended nuclear deterrent from the United States to reassure allies, prevent destabilizing nuclear proliferation, and intense security competition in Asia.

2 For example, see John F. Copper, “Island Grabbing in the East China Sea,” *The National Interest*, September 14, 2012 <http://nationalinterest.org>.

3 John Pomfret, “U.S. takes tougher tone with China,” *The Washington Post*, July 30, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

4 Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996) 352 (5.89).

Third, the United States possesses nuclear weapons to deter attacks against the United States military. Military bases in Guam and in other countries in Asia and the Pacific, or US ships, especially aircraft carriers, are inviting targets for China. US nuclear capabilities play an important role in deterring such attacks, and will become more important as China continues to develop *sha shou jian*, or “assassin’s mace,” capabilities which target US military vulnerabilities.

Fourth, nuclear weapons play a role in stability—the absence of an incentive to launch a major attack as well as deter the escalation of conflict, assurance that the United States is guarded against surprise, and the possibility it may wait rather than retaliate immediately. The role of nuclear weapons in aiding stability and promoting the de-escalation of crises during the Cold War is well established. Although deterrence is always complicated, nuclear weapons have kept the long peace the world has enjoyed since 1945. However, should deterrence fail and conflict begin, the United States will want to keep it from escalating to a higher level, and nuclear weapons aid the ability of the United States to accomplish this.

Fifth, approximately nine countries are suspected of having biological weapons programs, including China, Iran, and Syria, and approximately seven countries have known or suspected chemical weapons capabilities, again including China, Iran, and Syria. The United States has neither. Nuclear weapons deter the use of other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), biological weapons (BW), or chemical weapons (CW), against the US homeland, its allies, or the US military.

In contrast to deterrence, coercion involves a change in the status quo; the opponent must change his behavior, and so it is harder to coerce than to deter. In addition, the targets of coercion are likely to value the issue at stake, such as territory, more highly, and thus the balance of resolve is likely to favor them. Thus, the coercer needs superior and diverse military capabilities, such as tactical and strategic nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons aid the coercive capabilities of the United States in three major ways. First, the United States needs the capability to make coercive threats to advance its interests. For example, a mix of conventional, tactical, and strategic nuclear weapons provides the United States with the capability to fight its way into areas where opponents like China have strong anti-access, area denial (A2D2) capabilities. The target of coercion could never be certain the United States would not use all its options, including nuclear threats. Second, the United States needs to convince the challenger not to escalate to a higher level of violence, or “move up a rung” in the “escalation ladder.” Conversely, the United States needs to have nuclear capabilities not only to deter escalation, but also to threaten escalation including first-strike nuclear use—if necessary—to stop a conventional attack, or a limited nuclear attack, as well as to signal the risk of escalation to a higher level of violence, as the United States did during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Third, although laden with risks, nuclear weapons also provide the possibility of attacking first to limit the damage the United States or its allies would receive in the event of conflict. Whether the United States would strike first is another issue. Nonetheless, an unfortunate fact is nuclear weapons may be used, and if so, the United States must have the capabilities to prevail.

Augmented strategic forces are the prodigious conventional capabilities of the United States. They are the best in the world, but conventional forces cannot replace the unique deterrent and coercive roles of nuclear weapons for advancing the interests of the United States and providing for its security. Only nuclear forces produce a great level of destruction with few forces in a short period of time. Even for the United States, it can take days, weeks, and even months to mobilize conventional forces—which are certain to be detected and countermeasures taken—for either deterrent or coercive purposes. The psychological impact, and scale, efficiency, and rapidity of destruction made possible by nuclear weapons, dwarf that of any conventional weapon. Moreover, the balance of resolve in likely crises with China over Taiwan or the Spratly Islands are more likely to favor Beijing than Washington, so nuclear weapons are essential for tipping the balance in Washington's favor by a willingness to raise the stakes and risk nuclear confrontation.

At the end of day, only nuclear weapons can deter China. What was true during the Cold War for Moscow remains true today for other adversaries—the fact the leadership in Beijing or Tehran could lose all they value in less than one hour affects their decisionmaking calculus in ways conventional weapons cannot.

Conclusions

Nuclear weapons remain an important tool to advance the interests of the United States. They are a force for stability and provide deterrent and coercive capabilities the United States has needed in the past, depends on now, and will in the future. To preserve these interests, a reliable, credible nuclear deterrent must become a national priority. If these weapons continue to be neglected, the horrific outcomes and terrible choices they are designed to deter—avoiding war and discouraging challengers—are far more likely to occur.

The end of the Cold War changed much, but did not change the need to deter and coerce to ensure stability for the United States and its allies. Those are old needs of “reason of state,” recognized throughout the course of history, and are as identifiable to the ancient Greeks as they are to strategists today. The prodigious growth in US conventional capabilities cannot replace the core functions of state power served by nuclear weapons.

The fundamental inability to acknowledge nuclear weapons as key tools of statecraft is understandable. Proclaiming the value of nuclear weapons too loudly could hinder proliferation objectives. But the United States is at a crisis point. By not acknowledging these weapons' fundamental value, we have allowed bureaucracies to slight the responsibility to maintain a robust deterrent. The atrophy in United States strategic forces is a bipartisan national security problem, and one that must be addressed by focused and sustained leadership from both parties.

Failure to act now to correct this course weakens the relative power of the United States and hinders the ability of America to advance its objectives. Other states—most importantly China—choose not to be so restricted, and by their choice quicken the day when the United States will face the hard choice of withdrawing from its commitments or turning to its weakened nuclear force. Washington should appreciate

that the allies of the United States will face an equally hard choice—to stand with a diminished and strategically misguided United States or abandon it for a challenger who forsakes dreams of nuclear disarmament in favor of an unambiguous and realistic comprehension of the permanent value of nuclear weapons for the advancement of its national interests and strategy.

Bradley A. Thayer

Bradley A. Thayer is Professor and Head of the Political Science Department at Utah State University. He has consulted for the Department of Defense and is the author of numerous articles and books including *American Empire: A Debate* (with Christopher Layne) and is editor of *American National Security Policy: Essay in Honor of William R. Van Cleave*.

Thomas M. Skypek

Thomas M. Skypek is a former Washington Fellow at the National Review Institute, a former Nuclear Scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and a national-security consultant in Washington, District of Columbia.

