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Rethinking the Role of Nuclear Weapons

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Conclusion

In the new era, the United States does not need to rely on nuclear weapons to prevent a global challenger from upsetting the status quo, to compensate for weakness in conventional defense, or to impress others of its power. While the threat of nuclear response to conventional attack is no longer crucial to U.S. strategy, there is a mounting danger that rogue states might adopt this tactic to deter U.S. power projection. At the same time, the United States does need nuclear weapons to deter not only nuclear attack but also biological attack, which could be just as deadly and which might not be deterred by the threat of U.S. conventional retaliation. The United States should aim to reduce the importance and attractiveness of nuclear weapons, to delegitimize their use in response to conventional threats, yet also to sharpen nuclear deterrence against biological weapons. It could do this by stating that it would use nuclear weapons only in retaliation for attacks with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) — in essence, a no-first-use-of-WMD policy.

Introduction

The reduction of U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals suggests that such weapons have a reduced role in world affairs. But what that role should be is unclear. Should nuclear weapons be available only to prevent nuclear war or, instead, to underpin global security? The two concepts have divergent implications. If nuclear weapons have any use beyond retaliation for nuclear attack, the danger of nuclear war is bound to be higher. Conversely, lowering the danger of nuclear violence weakens the utility of the fear that that danger produces.

In the Cold War, the fear of nuclear war was used by the United States to engender caution and stability. Had it not been for that fear, the 20th century might have had three world wars instead of two. The nuclear standoff — parity between arsenals large enough to assure mutual destruction — negated the nuclear threat of each superpower and thus the likelihood of nuclear war. Yet, simultaneously, the Americans shrewdly negated that negation, on their side, by threatening to use nuclear weapons if need be to block any Soviet aggression. Fearing for their way of life, they risked nuclear war, potentially annihilation, to buttress the status quo.

In a world transformed, do we still need to parlay the fear of nuclear war in order to secure U.S. interests and international peace? The American way of life is not threatened; rather, it is on the march. Because

the main current of change—globalization—promotes its interests and ideals, the United States no longer wants to freeze the international situation. U.S. technological and conventional military capabilities instill confidence in means other than nuclear weapons to thwart aggression.

Should we therefore embrace the opposite of the U.S. Cold-War philosophy about nuclear weapons, disengaging them from international security and military strategy, reserving them strictly to ensure that nuclear war never occurs? Is this Humankind's chance to eradicate nuclear fear, even if the weapons themselves cannot be eradicated? The problem with such a smooth and alluring idea is that international peace and U.S. interests might suffer, in very real ways, if the fear of nuclear war is nullified.

The hot debate about whether to abolish nuclear weapons is less important than the abolitionists think. Nuclear weapons are here to stay—period. The more practical argument over the right size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal will be bracketed by a few thousand warheads at the high end and a few hundred at the low end. That difference matters less for U.S. interests and international security, including whether nuclear weapons are used again, than the more fundamental question: Should nuclear weapons have any purpose other than to prevent nuclear war?

Let us not bureaucratically extend the deterrence concept of the first phase of the nuclear age while claiming that the role of nuclear weapons has shrunk simply because there are fewer of them. By the same token, let us resist the emotional urge to retire nuclear weapons without appraising their future value in securing national interests and international peace.

The Role of Nuclear Weapons from 1945 to the 1980s

The atomic bombs dropped on Japan were not considered war-fighting weapons but rather war-ending weapons. Such was the purpose, prediction, and result. The early post-war years were consumed by anxiety about the Soviets getting the bomb and woolly proposals for international control. Once the United States became threatened by Soviet nuclear weapons, a new debate began: Should nuclear weapons be used to fight wars, to deter any Soviet aggression, or only to deter nuclear war? The passing of time—and of intellectual torch, from Dulles to McNamara to Kissinger—only sharpened the dilemma. As both the potential scale of nuclear war and the perceived threat of Soviet expansion grew, both the risk of threatening to use nuclear weapons and the risk of not doing so rose.

The option that prevailed was to rely on nuclear weapons to block Soviet aggression, back up Cold War diplomacy, and deter nuclear attack. This was manifested in employment doctrine (initially massive retaliation, then flexible response); in weapon types, deployment, and cooperation with allies (tactical nuclear weapons and the nuclear umbrella); in targeting (extensive and diverse); and in the politics of U.S.-Soviet confrontation (insistence on parity, rejection of minimal deterrence, the arms race, and nuclear brinkmanship). The chosen strategy dismissed sentiment on the Left that nuclear war must be avoided at any cost. Nuclear fear was needed to discourage Soviet recklessness. Lest that fear be eased, some risk of nuclear war was worth running.

Behind the common slogan "better dead than red" was a strategic calculus. The Soviet Union was viewed as no ordinary enemy, but as a mortal, messianic one with untold resources. Moscow wanted to revise the status quo, if not to convert the world to communism then at least to get the upper hand over the United States in vital regions (Europe, East Asia, the Middle East). The U.S. response was at once conservative and high-risk. To preserve stability, apocalypse was threatened. No one put the paradox better than Kissinger: "The enormity of modern weapons makes the thought of all-out war repugnant, but the refusal to run any risks would amount to handing the Soviets a blank check" (*Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, 1957).

This was no bluff. The United States was willing to initiate nuclear violence if conventional defense failed. Since the Soviet Union was judged the stronger military power, the failure of conventional defense in the event of war had to be anticipated. So U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons to deter aggression led to preparations for actual use, (e.g., battlefield deployment, operational plans, and training).

Although the immediate object of this U.S. doctrine of nuclear "first use" was the Soviet tank threat to West Germany, hard-nosed thinkers were comfortable with it for wider reasons. From Napoleon on, neither classical balance of power nor attempts at supranational authority could spare the world from increasingly lethal conflicts. As of August of 1945, war had become so destructive that great powers had to avoid it. Sure enough, as the Cold War wore on, direct war between great powers came to look less likely. But if the world were made entirely safe from nuclear weapons—if never used first they would never be used at all—this salutary effect would be lost. So as citizens learned to live with the bomb, defense intellectuals learned to appreciate it.

Because nuclear weapons figured in military strategy, they became important symbols of Soviet-American confrontation. As the token of ultimate power—the ability to destroy civilizations—each side's nuclear arsenal would be expanded and modernized as necessary to deny the other an edge that might tip the larger, global balance. The belief that such an edge could decide the outcome of an East-West crisis added "escalation management" (a classic Cold-War oxymoron) to the portfolio of purposes served by nuclear weapons. As a consequence, American strategists were deaf to calls to slash the stockpile and to strip nuclear weapons of every purpose but to deter nuclear war.

Nuclear Weapons and World Politics in the New Era

The conditions that once led the United States to rely on nuclear weapons to shore up its strategic position and international stability no longer exist. Although now predominant and unthreatened, the United States is not a status-quo power. Rather, it is a beneficiary of international change, which yields economic liberalization, democratization, integration and improved security. Most of the world's economic output, technological capacity, and military power lie within the circle of free-market democracies—the Americas, Europe, East Asia—a community that continues to expand. U.S. enemies are embattled by free-market forces, democratic ideals and truthful information. The success of the past two decades, beyond any expectation, has dispelled the dread of instability. This promising trend is reducing the danger of the sort of world war that made this century history's bloodiest—the danger that caused the

United States to engage nuclear weapons in the cause of equilibrium.

The prime mover of the favorable course of world politics is information technology, which is propagating investment, reform, and accountable government. It is also increasingly crucial to power, including military power. A nation's ability to create and apply information technology depends on its openness and its involvement in the world economy. Authoritarian nations with excessive state economic power, however large, will be handicapped in the dominant technology of the new era. The world's most successful powers will likely be free-market democracies with convergent interests and outlooks, as is now the case.

Some scholars of geopolitics believe that clinging to its top ranking should be America's paramount objective. But in reality, the United States has an increasing equity in the success of the other great powers—Japan, the European Union and, yes, China. U.S. foreign policy is designed not to limit others but to collaborate and grow with them. The United States need not fear any challenger to the extent that it must use the danger of general nuclear war to help contain it, as it did the Soviet Union.

America's strong position is commonly viewed as the outcome of the Cold War. But it is, more importantly, a natural and enduring condition of the information revolution—the product of U.S. openness and the shrinking of its government. Although the U.S. nuclear arsenal is the world's best, it is no longer an emblem of American power. Compared to U.S. technological and economic leadership, nuclear weapons neither distinguish the United States nor reflect the essence of its strength. So diluting the symbolic significance of nuclear weapons cannot hurt and could help American interests and image.

Non-nuclear military strength, in contrast, is integral to American power in the new era. The forces of the United States can defend its interests wherever required. Because the United States has begun to exploit the new technology strategically, its lead is growing. U.S. forces are being networked, making them more lethal, less vulnerable, and capable of integrated operations. By harnessing information technology, it has the chance to prevail in any conflict with relatively little loss of life. The idea that the United States would risk—indeed, start—nuclear war to avoid military defeat is a detail of a chapter of history now closed.

With its growing conventional military lead, the absence of a mortal enemy, and its confidence in the face of change, the United States could decouple nuclear weapons from its military strategy and foreign policy without endangering the nation. But before redefining the purpose of nuclear weapons, we must ask if there are any emerging non-nuclear threats that warrant the threat of a nuclear response.

The Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

Like most technologies, dangerous or benign, biochemical technology is spreading as the global economy integrates. Consequently, U.S. forces, U.S. allies and eventually U.S. society will be vulnerable to attack with biological and chemical weapons delivered by long-range missiles or clandestine means (which will become easier as globalization makes the United States more accessible). Of the two types,

biological weapons present the greater danger of casualties on a nuclear scale. Ten kilograms of anthrax is at least as deadly as a 10-kilogram nuclear explosive and is cheaper, easier to assemble, and more portable. While chemical weapons are more likely to be used to disrupt U.S. military operations, biological weapons pose more terrible and lingering dangers to the general population, much like nuclear weapons. Initially, rogue states might threaten to use biological weapons, too, against U.S. troops in a local war. However, as the United States neutralizes this threat by exploiting information technology—dispersing its forces and striking accurately from afar—determined enemies will develop longer-range means to threaten U.S. forces, allies and territory. Try as it might to arrest the spread of these weapons, the United States must prepare to prevent or defend against their use.

Defense alone, with anti-missile and counterforce weapons, cannot make American forces and citizens entirely safe from lethal biological agents. So deterrence is crucial. If an enemy is already receiving the full brunt of U.S. conventional strikes when it opts to threaten biological attack, the threat of U.S. conventional reprisal will be ineffective. Since the United States has foresworn biological and chemical weapons, that leaves nuclear deterrence.

Were the United States to declare that, with the Cold War over, nuclear weapons should be used only to deter nuclear war, there is a theoretical chance that other nations would be less inclined to obtain them. But as a practical matter, the countries whose WMD programs most worry the United States are rogue states, like Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. Since their aim is to deter U.S. conventional attack, an American pledge not to use nuclear weapons first would not diminish their interest in nuclear weapons.

Such states already assume that using nuclear weapons against U.S. interests could trigger U.S. nuclear retaliation. They may view biological weapons as more usable, more credible, and less risky than nuclear weapons. A U.S. pledge not to use nuclear weapons first would make them even more eager to obtain and less hesitant to brandish and use biological weapons.

But would the United States be right to respond with nuclear weapons to a biological attack? When thousands of Soviet nuclear weapons were poised to strike, the first use of nuclear weapons by the United States risked a general nuclear cataclysm. In contrast, U.S. nuclear retaliation for a biological attack by a rogue state would risk, at worst, another biological or conceivably a nuclear attack. Far more likely, having proven its resolve, the United States would deter escalation and prevail. By being prepared to respond to any WMD attack with nuclear weapons, and saying so, the United States is less likely to have to do so.

Of course, an actual U.S. nuclear retaliation for biological attack would be a grave, world-changing event. But it would not imperil the Nation and its global interests, let alone human viability. And it would make less likely that *any* WMD would ever be used again—at least against the United States.

Dull Deterrence and Sharp Deterrence

The strongest argument for a nuclear no-first-use pledge during the Cold War was that it could save us

from nuclear hell. The strongest argument against such a pledge was that it could condemn us to Communist hell. Now that the Soviet Union is gone, neither argument is persuasive. Concepts saved in the attic from a different time, a different world, are not helpful. A fresh idea is needed.

During the Cold War, the United States would not exclude a nuclear response to any attack. It was motivated by a general concern about the Soviet menace and a specific concern about an attack on West Germany. The former was the context and the latter was the focal point of U.S. doctrine on initial use. It was surely the specific prospect that the United States might resort to nuclear weapons if war broke out in Europe that got the Kremlin's attention. The general U.S. unwillingness to exclude nuclear first-use reinforced the particular application.

In light of the difficulty of preventing or defending against the growing threat of biological weapons, the United States would make a fateful mistake if it restricted the purpose of nuclear weapons to deterring nuclear attack. The gains from such a shift are nebulous; the cost all too clear—an invitation to potential enemies to acquire, threaten and use biological weapons.

We want rogue states to think that biological weapons cannot be used and can endanger their possessors because they could cause a nuclear response. We want them to feel this fear quite sharply. To the extent that the United States fails to pinpoint this problem in defining the purpose of nuclear weapons, the fear will be dull. Current U.S. policy regarding the use of nuclear weapons is not substantially different from its Cold War policy; it maintains ambiguity about the circumstances under which the United States would resort to nuclear weapons. Despite growing U.S. conventional military superiority, even a nuclear response to conventional attack is not excluded.

During the Cold War, given the magnitude of the Soviet threat, both broad deterrence and focussed deterrence were required. In the new era, the need for broad deterrence is gone and the need for sharp deterrence is acute. Yet, so far-fetched is the thought that the United States would use nuclear weapons in response to conventional attack that the current open-ended policy dulls deterrence. (If the policy causes sharp fear, why did the United States have to warn Saddam Hussein that use of WMD in the Gulf War could trigger a nuclear response?) Ambiguity is sometimes useful. In the current era, it does more harm than good.

The United States should warn explicitly that it might respond with nuclear weapons to WMD attacks against U.S. interests. (Chemical weapons could be included, though they are less dangerous than biological weapons.) To sharpen the fear to a finer point, the United States should also say that it foresees no need to use nuclear weapons except in response to WMD attacks. By declaring that the only legitimate use of WMD (i.e., nuclear weapons) is in retaliation for WMD attack, such a policy would strengthen deterrence by underscoring that a WMD attack would warrant such a response. It would further bolster deterrence by erasing the incredible aspect of current policy—i.e., nuclear response to conventional aggression. Finally, it would create a new threshold separating WMD from conventional warfare, which would clearly be in the U.S. interest, what with its conventional strength and its promise never to use biological or chemical weapons.

In its effort to stem the spread of nuclear weapons, the United States has said, in effect, it would not use nuclear weapons against states that forswear them. But what if such a state acquires biological weapons, which can kill Americans no less than nuclear explosives? Indeed, what if it used them? In view of this danger, the United States should explicitly retract its pledge not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states that use biological weapons. Far from undermining nuclear non-proliferation, an American pledge not to use WMD first could help the cause by reducing the utility of nuclear weapons. And it would underscore that any use of a weapon of mass horror would justify a response in kind.

How would such a U.S. policy work toward another nuclear power, say, Russia or China? Now that Russia's conventional forces are weak, it has reversed its doctrine not to use nuclear weapons first. Given its decaying command and control system and the possibility of political turmoil, this shift could prove dangerous. And, Russia is maintaining its ability to assemble and use biological weapons. An American policy not to be the first to use WMD would both delegitimize Russia's growing reliance on nuclear weapons and sharpen deterrence against its use of biological weapons. Similarly, the policy would preempt Chinese interest in nuclear first-use and in biological weapons. At present, the Chinese would likely applaud and subscribe to such a U.S. pledge.

A U.S. doctrine to deter all WMD with nuclear weapons would require the United States to maintain no less than parity with every other nuclear power. Deterring a biological attack by a power with a larger nuclear arsenal, or by a rogue state allied with such a power, could be problematical. If, however, all other nuclear states were prepared to make do with smaller arsenals—say, a thousand weapons or fewer—the requirement to deter biological as well as nuclear weapons would not prevent the United States from doing so.

Opportunity Lost or Opportunity Taken?

One hopes the time will come when nuclear weapons can be retired. With its natural and durable advantages, the United States should want this as much as any country. Nuclear weapons may be hard to outlaw, but the world can outlive, or outgrow, the nuclear era. If the industrial age produced what Raymond Aron called "hyperbolic war," perhaps the information age can reduce the scale of deadly conflict. If, as well, the new era blesses free-market democracies with superior power, the world can become safer, and the need to rely on nuclear weapons to keep it safe can fade away.

We are not there yet. Rogue states are on the ropes, but with WMD, unchecked, they can hang on and do great harm. Concentrating nuclear deterrence on this problem—creating a sharp fear—by limiting the purpose of nuclear weapons to retaliation for WMD attacks, would be a step toward a world in which none of these weapons would ever be used again. The aim, after all, is to spare humanity from the horror of mass destruction, whatever the technical means of causing it. This era is promising, but also dangerous because of WMD. A new U.S. doctrine on the role of nuclear weapons can reduce the danger and strengthen the promise.

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