

POLS G22 - Security Studies – Essay 1



Is there a role for nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era?

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Introduction

Nuclear weapons are an incredibly quick and effective way to inflict massive destruction. The deployment of only one nuclear device can potentially destroy an entire city, and a substantial area outside of the initial explosion will be subject to devastating radiation damage. They are easily the most lethal weapons created by the human race. Because of this, they have had a profound effect on the way that warfare is viewed, planned, and executed. Since the detonation of two nuclear devices in Japan, there has existed the real possibility that the humanity could cause its own extinction. During the Cold War this possibility was turned into a military reality, with the USA and the USSR both holding enough atomic weapons to render substantial sections of the planet's surface uninhabitable.

The political effects of nuclear weapons have been as substantial as their military reality. Political language has defined two forms of war to account for the new destructive potential of atomic weapons, with war being split into 'conventional' conflicts (using non-nuclear weapons) and 'nuclear conflicts' (which include the use of nuclear weapons). There has never been a 'nuclear conflict', and the prevention of just such a conflict has consumed a considerable amount of political time and effort since 1945.

The very danger of nuclear weapons has fuelled argument both for and against their existence. Those who argue against nuclear weapons say that their destructive potential is too great for allowing their use as a strategic weapon. Those who argue for the nuclear weapons say that it is precisely because of their destructive potential that they should be utilised as a defensive weapon. They can be said to offer a highly effective

form of deterrence, most clearly exemplified by the Cold War example of what was called ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’ (MAD), whereby the USA and the USSR could not risk conflict with each other because of the danger of mutual annihilation. Deterrence suggests that no nation, be it nuclear or non-nuclear, can risk the danger of attacking a nuclear nation.

This paper examines the potential role of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era, and looks at arguments both for and against their continuing role in security. To do so it is split into three sections, examining respectively reasons for **supporting nuclear strategy**, reasons for being **against nuclear strategy**, and how we can go about **assigning a role for nuclear weapons** in the modern world. In support of nuclear weapons, there is an examination of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, and how deterrence might work today. In argument against nuclear weapons, there is an examination of the risks those nuclear weapons present, and the possibility that they are actually serving little purpose as a deterrence device. Finally, there is an examination of the role nuclear weapons may assume if the world today is seen as anarchic and comprised of independent states, and the role they may assume if the world is instead conceived as an “international society” of interconnected states.

By the conclusion of this paper, the reader will have a clear understanding of the arguments both for and against nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era.

Supporting nuclear strategy

Nuclear weapons can be argued to be essential in the prevention of major conflict between major powers because of their deterrence value. “Deterrence is to convince an enemy that the burdens and risks of any attack far outweigh any possible gains”¹, and nuclear weapons certainly allow the potential infliction of massive destruction on any attacker. Therefore, they theoretically have a very high deterrence value. It can be said that they keep the ‘nuclear peace’, whereby aggressive actions on any large scale have become impossible because of the danger of nuclear retaliation.

- Deterrence in the Cold War

During the Cold War between the USA and the USSR, the concept of deterrence was integral to foreign policy. There existed two superpowers with drastically different views on how the world should be organised, and there consequently existed a serious and ongoing source of diplomatically irresolvable global tension. Further to this, both superpowers had massive conventional and nuclear forces, and the ability to cause, to both each other and the rest of the world, serious harm. Deterrence, or the prevention of military conflict between the two superpowers, was therefore vital. Two forms of such deterrence were identified during this period, one being termed ‘general deterrence’, and the other ‘immediate deterrence’. “General deterrence relies on the existing power balance to prevent an adversary considering a military challenge”², and is a long-term strategy of defence. Immediate deterrence is a response to any specific challenge that

¹ David Owen, “Effective Deterrence”, in *The Nuclear Arms Race: Control or Catastrophe*, eds. Frank Barnaby and Geoffrey Thomas (London: Frances Pinter, 1982), 37.

² Richard N. Lebow and Janice G. Stein, “Nuclear lessons of the Cold War”, in *Statecraft and Security: The Cold War and Beyond*, ed. Ken Booth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 71.

such an adversary may pose, and is a short-term way to “discourage an imminent attack or challenge of a specific commitment”³. Nuclear weapons are effective in both forms of deterrence, offering both a long-term danger to opposing powers, and the immediate risk of retaliatory strikes in the short-term.

Nuclear deterrence in the Cold War was conceived in two ways, with one being called ‘Countervalue’ and the other ‘Counterforce’⁴. Countervalue deterrence threatens an enemy’s ability to retaliate in a nuclear conflict, undermines their stability through nuclear destruction, and presumes the destruction of the developed world if nuclear weapons are deployed. It is a deterrence of total annihilation. Counterforce deterrence emphasises the relative outcomes of a nuclear conflict. It is about denying the enemy the ability to wage war, and to limit their ability to cause damage if they continue in the conflict. Counterforce deterrence is useful if the initial deterrence value of Countervalue threats fail. It promises less than total destruction, but seeks to both cause the enemy serious harm, and to make sure that the defender comes out of the conflict better off in relative terms.

The horrific potential cost of nuclear war in either variant of nuclear deterrence was by no means ignored by those who advocated them, and the moral implications of nuclear devices were subject to intense debate. An interesting example of the justification of nuclear weapons as a deterrence device is that offered by Michael Waltzer when he said: “We threaten evil in order not to do it, and the doing of it would be so terrible that

³ Ibid, p.72.

⁴ Philip Bobbitt, *Democracy and Deterrence: The History and Future of Nuclear Strategy* (London: MacMillan, 1988), 3.

the threat seems in comparison to be morally defensible”⁵. The moral argument for threatening to cause tens of millions of deaths (at the very least) in a nuclear conflict was based on the idea that if “the deterrent succeeds, both the harm it forestalls and the harm that would result from its execution will be avoided”⁶, and that if the deterrent failed then the use of actually deploying it would be reduced.

- Deterrence Today

“Much of what we know about nuclear weapons and their impact upon statecraft comes from the experience of the United States and the Soviet Union”⁷, and from assumptions about their role during the Cold War. The standoff between the USA and the USSR provides the only complete picture of the utility and role of nuclear weapons, for we lack another example of two opposed powers with nuclear capacity. India and Pakistan both possess nuclear strike capacity today, but have done so for a relatively short length of time, and their conflict is only just beginning its nuclear cycle. Only in the superpower conflict of the post-World War do we have a ‘complete’ example of nuclear deterrence and threats.

This reliance on the Cold War has led to three assumptions about nuclear weapons and their role in deterrence. The first is that “nuclear weapons deter direct war between the countries that possess these weapons”⁸ through Mutually Assured Destruction, though the states may play out their conflicts through third party agents (as happened in the Cold War with Korea and Vietnam). The second is that “nuclear

⁵ Michael Waltzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, (1977), 274, quoted in John Finnis, Joseph M Boyle, Jr. and Germain Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 179.

⁶ John Finnis, Joseph M Boyle, Jr. and Germain Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 181.

⁷ Regina Cowen Karp, “The continuing nuclear challenge”, in *Security with Nuclear Weapons*, ed. Regina Cowen Karp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

weapons deter inadvertent war”⁹ through the danger of escalation and the threat of a nuclear response to a conventional weapons assault. The third and final assumption is that “nuclear weapons have an existential deterrent effect”¹⁰ because no country attacking a nuclear armed nation can exclude the danger of a nuclear retaliation. All three of these assumptions appear to be as applicable to today’s states as they were to the Cold War superpowers. Nuclear deterrence is credible even if you are not a superpower. Its credibility lies not in the number of warheads that a nation possesses (enough for a Countervalue strike for instance) but in the possession of any warheads at all (enough to either have a Counterforce strike or simply a highly destructive retaliation).

The end of the Cold War removed a polarisation between two superpowers that had existed for the best part of fifty years. In doing so, it removed a bipolar alliance structure across the world, and made more complex the question of who was the enemy and who was the ally. While it has been suggested that the USA is a hegemonic power stabilising the largely liberal democratic global community, others can point to increased tension in locations like the Middle East as an example of increasingly pluralistic alliance structures. Given the assumed role of nuclear weapons in assuring peace during the Cold War, they would appear to have a valid and necessary role in today’s world as well. Today, no less than twenty years ago, the deterrence power of nuclear weapons makes an attack on a nuclear state less likely, no matter if the potential enemy is the USSR or a small ‘rogue state’.

⁹ Ibid, 17.

¹⁰ Ibid, 17.

Against nuclear strategy

Nuclear weapons are far from being a highly supported military or political weapon. Now, as in the Cold War, there are those who object to their very existence, and feel that rather than enhancing safety through deterrence they “pose one of the greatest dangers to world security”¹¹. Deterrence assumes that an enemy will be deterred by an atomic threat, but patiently is unable to answer what the outcome may be if they are not. There is no doubt that the actual deployment of nuclear weapons would be horrific, and concerns about nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and even the actual use of nuclear weapons as credible deterrence are rife.

- Dangers of nuclear weapons

There is a strong argument that suggests “nuclear proliferation constitutes the principle threat to global security and that future theory and policy should take seriously the goal of a nuclear-weapons-free world”¹². Nuclear armament technology has spread from the USA (1945) to the USSR (1949) to the UK, France, China, India, Pakistan and (reputedly) Israel, North Korea and South Africa. The creation of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 has had some effect in preventing nations gaining access to nuclear weapons technology, but there is little doubt that “more states than ever before now have the technological opportunity to procure nuclear weapons”¹³. This spread of nuclear technology raises the increasing statistical possibility that the devices

¹¹ Zachary S. Davis, “Nuclear Proliferation and Nonproliferation Policy in the 1990s”, in *World Security: Challenges for a New Century*, 3rd ed., eds. Michael T. Klare and Yogesh Chandrani (New York: St Martins Press, 1998), 135.

¹² Nicholas J. Wheeler and Simon J. Davis, “Security, nuclear proliferation and the end of the Cold War”, in *Security Issues in the Post-Cold War World*, ed. Jane Davis, (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1996), 136.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.138.

will be utilised by one actor or another at some point in the future. There is a danger of nuclear deterrence failing between two nuclear nations. If there were ten, twenty, or even a hundred nuclear nations then that risk of deterrence failure would increase.

Furthermore, there is the possibility of nuclear weapons finding their way “into the hands of persons who would not show the prudence that the guardians of existing nuclear stockpiles have so far displayed”¹⁴. With an increasing number of nuclear devices in a growing number of nations, the possibility that they will fall into the hands of states with a record of using weapons of mass destruction or into the hands of non-state actors is amplified. The Iraqi regime was found to only be months away from creating a nuclear device during the 1991 Gulf War, and terrorist networks like Al-Qaeda have shown themselves to be willing to cause mass carnage. Nuclear weapons offer the most effective damage to effort ratio available. In states or organisations where weapons or acts of mass destruction are appreciated as a tool, the rationale of deterrence and non-use of nuclear weapons may not apply.

“The most fundamental assumption of the nuclear age has been that any large-scale nuclear war would be unthinkable horrific for both aggressor and victim”¹⁵, and this assumption is neither threatened nor invalidated by the end of the Cold War. If anything, the sentiments that it encapsulates are rendered more pertinent. The risks associated with nuclear weapons remain the same, and with the spread of nuclear technology, the risk of a third nuclear detonation in war (after Hiroshima and Nagasaki) arguably increases. The reliance on Cold War deterrence theory to prove nuclear weapons are ‘safe’ as a deterrent supposes that the conflict between the USA and the USSR is a universal example of

¹⁴ Michael Mendelbaun quoted in *ibid*, 149.

nuclear strategy and not a unique product “of the historical, social and cultural experiences of each country”¹⁶. It also takes for granted that nuclear weapons will stay in the hands of state actors. If either of these conjectures is incorrect then the cost in civilian lives could be enormous.

- Useless nuclear weapons (undermining deterrence)

Quite apart from the danger of deterrence failing or nuclear weapons finding their way into the hands of non-state actors, there is the possibility that Cold War deterrence theory is incorrect, and that nuclear weapons actually do not function in the role they have been assigned. John Mueller proposes that the “postwar world might well have turned out much the same even in the absence of nuclear weapons”¹⁷ due to a number of factors ranging from a deterrent effect caused by the memory of World War Two, superpower satisfaction with the international status quo, and the fear of conventional weapon escalation in a conflict. While the Cold War’s “lengthy period of peace among the most powerful states is unprecedented”¹⁸ it may not be indicative of anything greater than a dislike for conventional warfare due to recent historical events. In this scenario, deterrence of a sort is in effect, but it has little to do with the thousands of nuclear weapons possessed by both sides in the conflict.

In support of the argument against the utility of nuclear weapons in assuring deterrence, Mueller points out that among the forty-eight richest countries in the world, there have been no wars since World War Two of any substance (barring minor conflicts

¹⁵ Michael J. Mazarr and Alexander T. Lennon, *Toward a Nuclear Peace: The Future of Nuclear Weapons*, (London: MacMillan, 1994), 22.

¹⁶ Regina Cowen Karp, “The continuing nuclear challenge”, in *Security with Nuclear Weapons*, ed. Regina Cowen Karp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 9.

¹⁷ John Mueller, “The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons”, in *The Cold War and After: Prospects for Peace*, eds. Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, (London: MIT Press, 1999), 46.

like the Falklands War or the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia)¹⁹. Not all of these nations are nuclear, and it would be a stretch of the imagination to suggest that the resolution of all their conflicts of interest rested on the nuclear arsenals that just five nations held. It therefore follows that other factors were acting as deterrence to the exclusion of atomic weaponry.

Furthermore, there is the possibility that nuclear weapons will actually cause conflict through the stalemate they create between major powers. In the case of the USA and the USSR, this is exemplified in the wars through proxy, where they deployed resources, trained troops, and even sent in their own soldiers safe in the knowledge that their opposite number in international politics could challenge them directly about their actions. Conventional warfare in small nations can thus be used to score political points against a large nuclear rival, and nuclear deterrence acts only to prevent direct confrontation between nations that possess nuclear weapons. There is the possibility that “at best [...] nuclear weapons will keep the nuclear peace; they will not prevent – and, indeed, may even facilitate – the use of lower levels of violence”²⁰.

Assigning a role for nuclear weapons

There are strong arguments both for and against the use (or even existence) of nuclear weapons. On the danger they present there is total consensus. As a weapon, the nuclear bomb is unprecedented in its destructive ability and ease of delivery. As long as

¹⁸ Robert Jervis, “The Political Effects of Nuclear Weapons”, in *The Cold War and After: Prospects for Peace*, eds. Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, (London: MIT Press, 1999), 70.

¹⁹ John Mueller, 1999, 66.

²⁰ Robert Jervis, 1999, 71.

a nation possesses a bomber aircraft or a missile program it can launch its nuclear warheads, and in doing so decimate those within range of either vehicle. In the post-Cold War world, there are serious questions to be asked about the role (or lack thereof) of nuclear weapons in ensuring security for nations. On the one hand, there is the question of why a state may wish to obtain nuclear weapons even in light of the dangers and potential tensions they create, and on the other, there is the question of why a state may regard the idea of nuclear deterrence ineffective even if it worked between the Cold War superpowers. Two possible arguments regarding nuclear weapons are presented below. In the first, nuclear weapons are portrayed as an effective deterrent in an anarchic state system, and in the second as a hollow threat in an interconnected international society.

- In the anarchic state system

Perhaps the dominant paradigms in International Relations are those of Realism and Neorealism, in which the state is portrayed as a sovereign and autonomous entity existing in a world of anarchy. Anarchy in this sense is not absolute or literal, but rather it describes the existence of multiple states in a world without a higher or absolute authority. For Realists then there is no recourse to a mediating authority when one state infringes on the domain of another, and each state must regard its primary role as being that of ensuring its own survival. “Thus [...] security is defined in terms of that of the state, and what the state needs to be protected against is the threat or use of military power or other related instruments of coercion by another state”²¹

The use of nuclear deterrence in an anarchic world has obvious potential. The nuclear deterrence will remove the operational cost of maintaining a conventional force

²¹ Terry Terrif, Stuart Croft, Lucy James and Patrick M. Morgan, *Security Studies Today*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 175.

that could inflict equivalent damage on an attacker, and, if the nuclear threat is credible and the arsenal sufficiently large, nuclear weapons may prevent any challenge to a state occurring at all. In this sense nuclear weapons, and their role as a deterrent, act as a higher world authority, and one that cannot be affordably unleashed. Each nuclear actor may well be constrained by the other nuclear actors, but they are equally protected from a challenge by them. A nuclear peace can be brought to an anarchic state system that effectively traps each nation inside its own borders, but prevents future infringements of those borders by opposing states.

If a nation assumes it exists in an anarchic world then it has very strong arguments for obtaining and maintaining a nuclear arsenal. It cannot rely on other states to protect it, and can never be sure when a challenge to its sovereignty or autonomy may be launched in the absence of it having a strong deterrence ability. In the post-Cold War era, this is perhaps even more of a consideration, as the loss of Cold War bipolar influence augmented the complexity of the anarchic system. There are extra states to contend with, and an increase of racial, ethnic and other tensions.²² It is significant that “more countries are trying to achieve nuclear status and acquire ballistic missiles or chemical and biological weaponry than ever before”²³. Nuclear deterrence offers nations a way to protect their borders from attack, and it does so with very little cost unless the nuclear threat actually has to be carried out.

²² Nicholas J. Wheeler and Simon J. Davis, “Security, nuclear proliferation and the end of the Cold War”, in *Security Issues in the Post-Cold War World*, ed. Jane Davis, (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1996), 146.

²³ N. J. Rengger, “Arms Control, International Society, and End of the Cold War”, *Arms Control – Contemporary Security Policy*, 1 (1992): 40.

- In the international society

“The end of the Cold War has, at best, given way to an ambiguous new order”²⁴ comprising of multiple states interacting without a specific strategic agenda. Devoid of the polarising effect of allying states to one superpower or another, a much more uncertain system of cooperation based on state gain emerges. This is not to suggest that the world necessarily lacks order, or that any cooperation between states need be half-hearted. The international situation today can actually be interpreted in a positive light, with advocates of what is termed ‘international society’ suggesting that we are seeing “a convergence of beliefs and norms in the international community”²⁵. In this scenario, the states that comprise the international system are increasingly interconnected and therefore reliant on each other, and major conflict between them becomes more unlikely as a way of resolving contested issues.

International society suggests that there is more than an international system of states interacting with each other. It postulates the existence of bonds of commerce or politics or society that transcend the immediate and bind states together into a relatively coherent interconnected whole. It challenges the anarchy of the Realist world, and suggests that it has been mitigated by the need for stability and cooperation between different nations. Two types of interconnection allow the creation of an international society, with one being called *gemeinschaft* and the other *gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* ties are those based on common culture, experience or identity that occur naturally, while *gesellschaft* ties are those based on contractual agreements that are created by the parties

²⁴ Rick Fawn and Jeremy Larkins, “International Society After the Cold War: Theoretical Interpretations and Practical Implications”, in *International Society After the Cold War: Anarchy and Order Reconsidered*, eds. Rick Fawn and Jeremy Larkins, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 18.

²⁵ Ibid, 1.

affected by them. *Gemeinschaft* can bind nations comprising people who share some aspects of common culture or history and therefore comprise a unitary civilisation, while *geselleschaft* can foster cooperation between nations whose people share nothing but the wish to trade with each other for purely economic reasons. Contemporary international society can be portrayed as a hybrid of these two binding systems, with the original *gemeinschaft* international society forming in Europe and expanding through colonialism, and a *geselleschaft* process occurring between different cultures in today's global international society that collaborate with each other.²⁶

If international society exists it suggests a high level of interaction and interconnection between states in the world. Such interconnection reduces the credibility of nuclear deterrence as a defensive tool (and perhaps even removes the need for the existence of such deterrence at all). Nuclear deterrence relies on those being deterred believing that threat of nuclear weapon deployment is real. Interconnected nations are both unlikely to deploy nuclear weapons and to challenge each other in a way that would justify such a response in the first place. A pertinent example may be that the USA is highly unlikely to deploy nuclear weapons in a conflict with Canada, nor is any argument between the USA and Canada likely to escalate to even the most cursory conventional skirmish. If the postulation of an international society of states is correct, or even partially correct, then both the utility and credibility of nuclear deterrence is drastically reduced.

²⁶ Ibid, 10-11.

Conclusion

During the Cold War, certain presumptions were made about the role of nuclear weapons. They were used to assure peace by making war too costly an act for either superpower to engage in, and they were used as a deterrence threat to prevent one superpower infringing too closely on the interests of the other. The success or failure of these roles for nuclear weapons is open to debate. On one hand, there was no armed conflict between the two superpowers for almost fifty years, and on the other hand, there were many reasons why just such a conflict would be distasteful to either superpower even without the existence of nuclear weapons. In short, the role of nuclear weapons in the Cold War can be contested. This situation is unchanged in the post-Cold War era.

If nuclear weapons work as a deterrence method then they offer states existing in an anarchic world a viable way to protect their interests. If they do not work as a deterrence method (or if the international system is evolving into an international society) then nuclear weapons offer no protection and offer only the danger of unacceptable escalation in a serious conflict. The problem is that neither view is empirically provable as true, nor is there margin for error in a state's assessment of the international situation. To assume the existence of an international society that renders nuclear deterrence non-credible could mean a serious security problem for a state faced with a future nuclear 'bully', and to assume the existence of anarchy and the need for a state to rely only on itself could potentially lead to a nuclear war.

On balance, the most likely role for nuclear weapons is that of being a desirable deterrent in the post-Cold War international system, and the potential costs of nuclear

weapons as a deterrence device might be judged to outweigh the potential costs of being without them. Nuclear weapons have apparently worked successfully as a deterrent in a major conflict between two ideologically dissimilar superpowers, and there is no immediate reason to believe that the damage they can cause will not work as a deterrent just as well today. Furthermore, precisely because of their destructive power it is unlikely that any party would use nuclear weapons in the first place, nor that any party subject to a nuclear attack would wish to escalate the situation by a nuclear counter-strike. The danger of not having nuclear weapons as a deterrence device would appear to be much more pressing. If a state assumes that nuclear weapons are not necessary or are ineffective it leaves open the possibility that another state (with nuclear capacity) may challenge it with destruction in the future, and that it will have no effective deterrence option apart from total surrender. Indeed, a state may even face a conventional assault from a conventionally armed opponent that a nuclear deterrence could have prevented.

The “genie cannot be put back into the bottle”²⁷ with nuclear weapons, and while any state possesses nuclear weapons it makes sense for other states to attempt to do the same. Indeed, even if no nation possesses nuclear weapons, it makes sense for a state to attempt to gain the technology for a strategic advantage over others in the international system. Nuclear weapons offer both deterrence and (perhaps) coercive options to states that possess them, and this role is unchanged from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era. It is based on their destructive ability, and therefore is as permanent as the fear of that destruction.

²⁷ John Simpson, “The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Problem: Diagnosis and Treatment”, in *The International Nuclear Non-Proliferation Problem: Challenges and Choices*, eds. John Simpson and Anthony G. McGrew, (London: MacMillan, 1984), 181.

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