

**THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF MINIMAL DETERRENCE ON THE
PROLIFERATION OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION**

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THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF MINIMAL DETERRENCE ON THE PROLIFERATION OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Introduction

One of the greatest dangers facing the post-cold war world is the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). These consist of chemical, biological, and most importantly, nuclear weapons. Most analysts agree that it is in the interests of the United States to stop the enlargement of the nuclear club. It must also be recognized that the non-proliferation regime embodied in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) may not be able to halt the proliferation of such weapons completely. There may well be new nuclear powers in the not-too-distant future. U.S. policy makers must consider what effects the U.S. nuclear posture will have both upon the chances of proliferation and the deterrence of WMD use if the anti-proliferation regime should fail. The current trend toward a minimal deterrence stance—defined as 1000 or fewer nuclear weapons—will have a detrimental impact upon both of these arenas. Drastically reducing the U.S. nuclear arsenal will simultaneously increase the value attached to individual weapons thus increasing the incentives to attain them while decreasing the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella thus encouraging allies to attain their own nuclear

arsenals and reducing the likelihood that new nuclear nations will be deterred from using their weapons.

The current U.S. anti-proliferation strategy relies upon two strategies. The first is physical impediments. This includes export controls and International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) inspections among other devices in an attempt to make nuclear proliferation impossible. The second strategy is moral impediments. In signing the NPT the United States and other nuclear nations agreed to eventually move toward reducing and eliminating their nuclear arsenals. It was thought that the moral persuasion of such a position would cause other nations to forego the nuclear option. The contemporary embodiment of such thought is found in those calling for a minimal deterrent under the belief that such a move will strengthen the moral standing of the United States.¹ If we reduce our arsenals, others will reduce theirs and still others will choose not to develop the weapons.

Not all experts in the field of nuclear strategy believe that such a policy is wise or even effective. The argument that reducing the nuclear stockpile will increase the country's moral standing is tenuous at best, and there is no proof that a stronger moral stance will be enough to cause other nations to follow. Authors such as George Questor, Victor Utgoff, and Kathleen Bailey argue that reduction of the U.S. nuclear

¹ Examples are Jonathan Dean of the Union of Concerned Scientists. And Congressman Byron L. Dorgan.

arsenal would be a dangerous mistake. The moral benefits will be overwhelmed by the increased incentives to proliferate and the reduced deterrence of nuclear use brought about by minimal deterrence or similar massive-reduction strategies.

Countries pursue nuclear weapons, not because of United States policy, but because of domestic and regional realities. To reduce the chances that a given nation will decide to proliferate, the environmental variables encouraging the choice must be eliminated or counterbalanced. In other words, the decision calculus must be modified to favor non-proliferation over proliferation. Given the nature of the problem, no single action or strategy can stop all nuclear proliferation. There is no way to change the situation so that it is in the interest of all nations to forego nuclear weapons, but certain policies will affect more nations than others. Moral imperatives do little to change the local variables and thus have on a minimal impact upon the decision to proliferate. Deterrence policies impact the realities of the local situation and have a greater chance of affecting the decision. Minimal deterrence favors the former over the latter.

A stance of minimal deterrence means a significant reduction in the number of nuclear weapons held by the United States even below the

proposed START II levels of 2,500-3,500 warheads.² This would send a signal abroad that the U.S. is beginning to rely on existential deterrence for its defense; that nuclear weapons are so overwhelmingly powerful that the U.S. needs only a small number for its defense. If the U.S. only needs a few to defend itself, surely a small number would be enough to intimidate the enemy of most likely proliferators. Each individual nuclear warhead is thus raised in value and therefore worth seeking, even at a high price.

At the same time, such a stance decreases the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent by reducing flexibility thus rendering massive retaliation a more probable option. Such a strategy has little or no domestic support and thus is self-detering. Reduction also increases reliance upon conventional deterrence which, if not coupled with a strong nuclear component, is doomed to failure. Finally, Countries allied with the U.S. and reliant upon its extended nuclear guarantees such as Japan, South Korea, and Germany, might begin to feel that the U.S. can no longer provide the protection they need and develop a domestic nuclear program.

A more appropriate signal might be to maintain a large number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal and thus send notice that nuclear weapons are only useful in large numbers. This would have the effect of

² Stephen A. Cambone & Patrick J. Garrity, "The Future of U.S. Nuclear Policy." Survival, vol. 36, no. 4,

raising the nuclear utility threshold and deterring proliferation. The largest contribution this would have is that it would maintain the current decision calculus which has deterred most nations from choosing to develop nuclear weapons.³

The U.S. could further supplement its nuclear deterrent by developing a new tier of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons that would be more usable and thus a more credible deterrent. Using such weapons to target enemy power structures instead of the general population would be more believable and decrease the utility of others' nuclear arsenals thus raising the nuclear utility threshold and lowering the desire for proliferation. These options would all impact the objective decision calculus of potential proliferating states and change the balance against WMD development by reducing the reasons for and the benefits of the weapons.

The Dangers of Nuclear Proliferation

There exists a general consensus on the dangers of nuclear proliferation. While some believe that proliferation may not be as grave a threat as many purport it to be, virtually no one would choose to allow

Winter 1994-95, p. 73.

³ Leonard S. Spector describes the success of the current non-proliferation efforts in his "Neo-Nonproliferation" article in Survival, Spring 1995, pp. 66-85.

proliferation if given the option.⁴ The expansion of the nuclear club would present both direct and indirect dangers to the U.S. and its allies.

The direct threat comes from the actual use of nuclear weapons. The greater the number of possessors of nuclear weapons, the greater chance that someone will use one either intentionally or accidentally. New nuclear powers will increase the use of use because they lack reliable command and control and because their forces will lack the survivability to create reliable second-strike capabilities increasing the likelihood of first use.⁵ A greater number of nations with nuclear weapons also means there are more possibilities for a security leak and an increased likelihood that these weapons will fall into the hands of terrorist groups. Pete Domenici calls the proliferation of nuclear weapons “the most likely scenario for an actual incident.”⁶

The United States will not likely be a direct target of nuclear weapons except for the possibility of a terrorist strike. No potential new nuclear nation has the capability to reach the U.S. homeland in the foreseeable future. U.S. forces and allied nations, however will be directly at risk. “Countries geographically close to Libya, Iraq, Iran, and

⁴ Kenneth Waltz has at times been construed to support the proliferation of nuclear weapons, but it is my opinion that he merely sees them as a non-threat. He does not encourage the proliferation of these weapons. Indeed, he claims that the spread of nuclear weapons is slow that that is a good state of affairs. Kenneth Waltz & Scott Sagan, “More May Be Better.” The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company: 1995), p. 1-2.

⁵ George Questor, “The Future of Nuclear Deterrence.” Survival, Spring 1992, p. 86.

⁶ Pete V. Domenici. “Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction.” Washington Quarterly, Vol. 18, No. 1, Winter 1995, p. 142.

North Korea, for example, may face the possibility of WMD strikes against their urban centers in the foreseeable future.”⁷ U.S. forces in these regions will also be susceptible to WMD strikes by enemy nations.

The indirect threat of proliferation involves its impact upon the decision-making process of the United States. The U.S. may be far less willing to intervene in foreign conflicts if there is a nuclear risk involved. The ability of the U.S. and its allies to respond to crises would be severely restricted. Actions such as the Gulf War, the British recovery of the Falkland Islands, the French action supporting Chad against Libya, or even the current deployment of NATO troops to Bosnia could come to be considered too dangerous.⁸ The U.S. would be forced to limit its defense planning and its intervention to areas that were nuclear safe. Such action would require a complete re-evaluation of the U.S. role of global engagement. “The rise of well-equipped regional powers with greater political-military confidence could challenge the U.S. ability to deter regional conflict and project power.”⁹ The long-term effects of such restriction would be to reduce U.S. hegemony and thus global stability.

Kenneth Waltz argues that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is not necessarily dangerous and may even help to stabilize regions of the world. In some cases, he may be correct. Because of ethnic mixing and

⁷ Keith B. Payne, “Post-Cold War Deterrence and Missile Defense.” *Orbis*, Spring 1995, p. 207.

⁸ These examples come from Payne, p. 208.

geographical proximity nuclear weapons may help to deter conflict between India and Pakistan.¹⁰ In other situations, however, proliferation may be dangerous even if Waltz is correct. The risk of accidents increases with more fingers on the nuclear triggers no matter how careful these nations are. Similarly, the indirect effects of proliferation would still exist even if rational nations would never actually use their weapons. It is hard to imagine the United States getting involved in a situation where nations are threatening nuclear use and not being affected by the threat. Indeed, Waltz's theory of deterrence makes such a U.S. response inevitable. U.S. generals would be foolish to ignore a nuclear threat simply because no rational nation would ever use such weapons. Certainly, proliferation would restrict U.S. freedom of action.

The Causes of Proliferation

Countries develop weapons of mass destruction for one simple reason: they believe that they will benefit from them. They make a rational choice that their country will be better off for security, power, or prestige reasons and that these benefits will be greater than the consequences of international disrepute. It follows then that the

⁹ Philip L. Ritcheson. "Proliferation and the Challenge to Deterrence." Strategic Review. Spring 1995, p. 39.

¹⁰ Brahma Chellaney, International Security, Summer 1991, v.16:1, pp. 68-69.

simplest way to restrict the proliferation of such devices is to change the decision calculus to favor restraint over development.¹¹

There are two means that may be used to affect a country's decision to develop WMD. These are subjective and objective. Subjective means include moral compellence and modifying the intrinsic value assigned to WMD. It is hard to quantify subjective means, but they have an affect. Objective means are more easily quantified. These include changing the security situation or threatening the offending country with harm. Both means will have an affect, but discouraging proliferation is better accomplished by changing the security environment than by shaming nations into compliance. Reducing the need for nuclear weapons or rendering their benefits unlikely will have a much greater success rate than trying to overwhelm these benefits with moral pleas.

There are many reasons nations choose to pursue the development of weapons of mass destruction. Lt. Col. Frederick Strain, USAF highlights several such reasons in an article entitled "Understanding Nuclear Addiction."¹² Lt. Col. Strain proposes a model based upon Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" which examines six reasons nations proliferate based upon their level of needs.

¹¹ George Questor & Victor Utgoff, "Toward an International Nuclear Security Policy." Washington Quarterly, October 1994, Vol. 17, No. 4, p. 2..

¹² Strain, Lt. Col. Frederick, USAF. "Understanding Nuclear Addiction." Strategic Review, Summer 1993, p. 58-69.

The most basic level is survival. This is embodied by Israel and South Africa's decision to go nuclear. These nations do not rely upon their weapon for deterrence, but as a guarantee of survival. The second level is deterrence. Nations facing neighbors with superior conventional firepower might develop WMD to even the odds and prevent an enemy attack. Level three is prestige. "Nuclear weapons may be perceived as placing a nation at the pinnacle of military capability and therefore at the pinnacle of military prestige."¹³ The fourth level is regional security/hegemony in which a nation develops WMD to satisfy regional security concerns. The Middle East and South Asia fall into this category. Level five is similar, but focuses upon a more global orientation. Strain labels this "grand autonomy." Nations falling into this level are the four non-U.S. declared nuclear powers (Russia, France, China, and the U.K.). The final level is that of superpower status. This is not merely a nuclear question, but relies also upon other factors. Nuclear arsenals are necessary for superpower status, but not sufficient.

For the purposes of this study, only the first four categories are relevant. The last two regard nations that have already developed nuclear weapons and the weapons are codified under the NPT. These countries are not likely to forego their nuclear arsenals anytime soon. Nations falling into the first four categories, however, can be more easily

¹³ Strain, pp. 61-62.

influenced. If the need for survival, deterrence, prestige, or regional security can be removed, or if the ability of nuclear weapons to satisfy these needs can be blunted, then proliferation can be avoided.

Those advocating minimal deterrence do so because they believe that a significant reduction in U.S. nuclear forces will give the U.S. moral credibility on the issue of nuclear weapons. It is their argument that if the United States begins to disarm, other nations will see that we are rejecting nuclear weapons and follow our lead, thus choosing not to proliferate. This is an attempt to reduce proliferation through subjective means. Such a stance is misled.

Moral leadership amounts to shaming other nations into bowing to the United States' whims. Besides aggravating the dissatisfaction the developing world has with what they perceive to be the double-standard imposed on nuclear weapons, such moral posturing does little to change the situation that provoked the desire to develop nuclear weapons in the first place. Leadership may reduce the prestige gained from nuclear weapons, but it may also increase it because the new nuclear nation has greater parity with the superpowers. It surely does nothing to ensure the survival of nations, deter their enemies, or stabilize regions. Without modifying these conditions which make proliferation appealing, moral posturing is doomed to failure except where the reasons for proliferation is merely prestige.

The argument put forward by minimal deterrence strategists is that development of nuclear weapons in the third world is somehow linked to weapons in the United States. If only the United States would reduce its weapons, other nations would follow that lead. They see the subjective value of U.S. weapons being tied to the subjective value given to weapons by potential proliferators. This is flawed from two perspectives. First, it assumes that a reduction of U.S. weapons would lead to greater moral standing. There is no proof of this. Many theorists assert it, but little study has been done to prove this link.¹⁴ For it to be true, other nations must truly pay close attention to U.S. nuclear policy. This is not the case except when U.S. weapons interfere with their interests through security guarantees, as in the case of the enemies of Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, or through direct intervention, as in the Gulf War. In other words, if there is some objective affect upon their security, countries are affected by U.S. policy, but if the impact is merely subjective, the link is much less. U.S. policy in general may set the tone for how the world views weapons, but there is no proof that reductions will radically influence this in a positive direction. Indeed, any subjective changes in the value of nuclear weapons are likely to make them more, rather than less, attractive.

¹⁴ David Gompert, Kenneth Watman, & Dean Wilkening, "Nuclear First Use Revisited." *Survival*, Vol. 37, No. 3. Autumn 1995, pp. 38-39.

Secondly, minimal deterrence assumes that nations are responsive to U.S. moral posturing. Nations pursue nuclear weapons for particular reasons, not because the U.S. condones or condemns them. For most nations, the reasons they choose to pursue nuclear weapons has little to do with the fact that that United States has weapons. While these nations may use this as an excuse for their pursuit, it is only that: an excuse. Should the U.S. declare today that it was going to forego all nuclear weapons, those nations would only find another excuse for their non-compliance. They would not revoke their own weapons, even if they had previously stated that they would.¹⁵ Rather than affect those nations who already have nuclear weapons or are pursuing them, reduction of U.S. nuclear forces would only please those nations who “can’t proliferate anyway.”¹⁶ Nations seek nuclear weapons because of regional or domestic concerns. Requiring U.S. actions to coincide with their own is merely a diplomatic tool used when seeking other concessions.¹⁷

Two examples prove the lack of subjective linkage between U.S. nuclear posture and the decision to pursue nuclear weapons. Both China and India pursued nuclear weapons for reasons other than U.S.

¹⁵ Bailey, p. 32.

¹⁶ Thomas Reed, “Shaping Nuclear Policy for the 1990s: A Compendium of Views.” Report of the Defense Policy Panel of the Committee on Armed Services - House of Representatives 102nd Congress, December 17, 1992, y4.ar5/2 N88/5, p. 562.

possession of similar weapons. China pursued weapons for prestige as well as an objective threat from the United States and parity while India pursued them for security from a regional threat (China).

While U.S. nuclear threats did affect China's decision to go nuclear, they were not the sole or even necessarily the most prominent reason for the decision. China also pursued nuclear weapons because of Russia and to prove that they were not subservient to either nation.¹⁸ China is an interesting case because the United States directly threatened it with the use of nuclear weapons both to end the Korean stalemate and to resolve the Quemoy-Matsu crises. President-elect Eisenhower "explicitly warned the Chinese of his intention to escalate the war if the armistice negotiations [surrounding Korea] remained stalemated."¹⁹ Similarly, the U.S. military relied upon the threat of nuclear attack to defend the islands of Quemoy and Matsu from Chinese invasion during the Taiwan crisis.²⁰ The affect of these incidents was to make China highly sensitized to the U.S. nuclear threat. True, China had the Soviet nuclear umbrella to defend them, but they did not feel

¹⁷ John Deutch, "Shaping Nuclear Policy for the 1990s: A Compendium of Views." Report of the Defense Policy Panel of the Committee on Armed Services - House of Representatives 102nd Congress, December 17, 1992, y4.ar5/2 N88/5, pp. 206-207.

¹⁸ Gompert, Watman, & Wilkening, p. 39. Also Strain, p. 62.

¹⁹ John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, China Builds the Bomb, (Sanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 13-14.

²⁰ Lewis & Xue, p. 34.

that it was reliable. The Soviets would never risk an atomic war with the United States in defense of China.²¹

The decision to develop nuclear weapons, however, was not based upon these security threats, but rather upon “fundamental national interests.”²² Mao was insistent upon breaking the “nuclear monopoly” of China’s adversaries. This included both the United States and the Soviet Union. Mao pursued such weapons because without them, “others don’t think what we say carries weight.”²³ The Chinese also pursued the atomic bomb because they believed it would bring them into parity with the United States. The U.S. arsenal was small enough that the Chinese believed that they could create an arsenal large enough to counter it.²⁴ Thus, China pursued its nuclear policy because it thought it could achieve parity with the U.S. arsenal. This is the risk that the United States runs if it reduces its weapons too far and other nations believe that they too can come into parity with the U.S. arsenal. A large gap is necessary to stop such ideas from forming.

India pursued nuclear weapons wholly independent of U.S. nuclear weapons. Only recently has India begun to try to forge the link between its weapons program and the U.S. arsenal. This seems to be more out of defense for its own weapons than a true attempt to get the U.S. to

²¹ Lewis & Xue, p. 12.

²² Lewis & Xue, p. 35.

²³ Lewis & Xue, p. 36.

disarm.²⁵ India's nuclear program was closely linked to China's nuclear program at its inception and continues to be determined by the Chinese threat. India's nuclear and missile policies are essentially dictated by the China factor."²⁶ The 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1964 nuclear explosion by China threatened India enough that it decided that it had to build nuclear weapons for its own defense. Since then, India has expanded the role of its nuclear weapons to include deterrence of Pakistan.²⁷ The Kashmir dispute threatens to erupt into open conflict and India believes that it needs its nuclear weapons to deter such an event from occurring. Thus India's nuclear weapons program relied upon regional threats and survival rather than upon U.S. nuclear posture.

It becomes apparent then that countries make the decision to pursue weapons of mass destruction for various reasons. Usually it is because the nation believes such weapons are necessary for survival. The decision can also be made because a country believes that gaining WMD capabilities will give it an edge over its adversaries who do not possess such weapons themselves. Finally, in a few cases, they can be pursued because a country believes that it can achieve some kind of parity or canceling effect by developing WMD of its own. In all of these

²⁴ Lewis & Xue, p. 35.

²⁵ Deutch, p. 207.

²⁶ Partha Ghosh, "Nuclear Rivalry in South Asia." Conflict Studies Paper 274, September 1994, p. 7.

cases U.S. nuclear posture is irrelevant except where it objectively modifies the regional security situation or falls to such a level that it appears that it can be equaled. Moral posturing will not change these conditions and thus will have a hard time overcoming the reasons for proliferation.

Nuclear proliferation cannot be contained merely by U.S. moralism. Baker Spring, a senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation states, "The United States cannot limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons through moral posturing. As tempting as it may seem, it would be self-defeating to brand all nuclear weapons evil and to assume that other countries will follow the U.S. if it decides to rid itself of nuclear weapons."²⁸ In fact, such a policy could be counterproductive and actually encourage other nations to pursue nuclear weapons as an advantage over a disarmed United States.²⁹ The U.S. would be better off adopting a strategy that reduces the incentives for acquiring WMD at all. Only then will a moral approach have a substantial impact.

Similarly, once nations choose to develop the nuclear option, only removing the usability or the benefits gained from such weapons can render them less threatening. Nations can be deterred from using the

²⁷ Shekhar Gupta, "India Redefines Its Role." *Adelphi Paper 293*, January 1995, p. 46.

²⁸ Baker Spring, "Stopping the Spread of Nuclear Weapons." *Heritage Foundation Reports #506*, October 8, 1994.

²⁹ George H. Questor and Victor A. Utgoff. "No-First-Use and Nonproliferation: Redefining Extended Deterrence." *Washington Quarterly*. Vol. 17, No. 2, Spring 1994, p. 100.

weapons they possess, but they are unlikely to be shamed into giving them up.

The Negative Effects of Minimal Deterrence on Nuclear Proliferation

In September 1994 President Bill Clinton endorsed the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) which calls for retention of a significant nuclear force including 14 *Trident* ballistic-missile submarines, 86 intercontinental bombers and 450-500 single-warhead ICBMs.³⁰ While the NPR does not call for a significant change in U.S. declaratory policy or nuclear posture at this time, its ultimate goal is a significant reduction of the role of nuclear weapons. “[The NPR’s] overall trend is towards the gradual, *de facto* marginalization of nuclear weapons....”³¹ The current U.S. military elite is becoming highly anti-nuclear. There are many calls from high leadership positions in the military and the Clinton administration for a reduction in U.S. force size to 1000 nuclear weapons or less.³² Such a policy is known as minimal deterrence. Some go even further and call for complete denuclearization of the United States. In the summer of 1994 Air Force General Charles Horner, at the time head of the US Space Command, illustrated this thinking when he said:

³⁰ Cambone, et al., p. 73-4.

³¹ Cambone, et al., p. 80.

³² Cambone, et al., p. 76.

The nuclear weapon is obsolete. I want to get rid of them all. I want to go to zero. I'll tell you why. If we and the Russians can get to zero nuclear weapons, think what that does for us in our efforts to counter the new war. The new war is this [proliferation of] weapons of mass destruction...in an unstable world. Think how intolerant we will be of nations that are developing nuclear weapons if we have none. Think of the high moral ground we secure by having none.³³

If the U.S. chooses to follow this path and move to a minimal deterrence posture or even farther toward denuclearization, the outcome could be the opposite of what General Horner intends. It could be encourage rather than the discourage proliferation.

The two arguments brought forward most often to defend this posture of marginalization are a declaration that a U.S. reduction in nuclear forces is the only way Russia will reduce its nuclear arsenal and the moral leadership argument referred to by General Horner. Neither of these is sufficient to balance against the encouragement of proliferation that would result from a minimal nuclear posture.

The former Soviet Union has a large number of nuclear weapons whose status is presently ambiguous.³⁴ The United States sees a threat in these "loose nukes" and would like to see them brought under control and eventually eliminated. The security of nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Union is questionable at best. The former tight control

³³ Michael J. Mazaar. "Virtual Nuclear Arsenals." *Survival*, vol. 37, No. 3, Autumn 1995, p 10.

³⁴ Many of these weapons are in a transitional state between the control of the republics of Ukraine and Kazakhstan and final control by Russia. They have been pledged to be sent back to Russia, but so far this has not taken place.

over these weapons has fallen by the wayside as the country makes its transition from a totalitarian state to a democracy. The disarray in the military worries Western policy analysts that warheads could be smuggled out of the country. The safest course would be to dismantle these weapons. It is said that this cannot happen unless the U.S. acts in a reciprocal manner by reducing its weapons accordingly.

Many in the U.S. believe that a modification of the START II agreement could accommodate this mutual reduction in arsenals. Such a modification could allow a reduction to 2,500-3,500 weapons. Some hope for an even lower number with 1,000 warheads being the most frequently cited number. Russia is unlikely to comply with such low numbers. Russia is having a hard time complying with current START I warhead limits and would be hard-pressed to reduce its arsenal at an even faster pace.³⁵ Without considerable progress in Russia towards reform and an integration into the world system, the Russians will not be willing to go along with a large reduction. Many in Russia see their country losing its superpower status and feel that nuclear weapons are one of the last vestiges of great power left. Convincing them to give up their weapons will be difficult under current political conditions. As it

³⁵ Cambone, et al., p. 91.

currently stands, it is unlikely that the Russian Parliament will ratify the START II agreement.³⁶

The argument that the U.S. will gain moral standing if it greatly reduces or eliminates its nuclear arsenal has merit, but suffers from being inadequate to halt the proliferation of WMD. Moral posturing may increase the credibility of its anti-proliferation efforts, but it does not remove the reasons that most nations proliferate in the first place.

Nuclear weapons are acquired by other nations because they believe them to be beneficial, not because the U.S. is hypocritical. Nations attempt to develop WMD because they feel they will increase the security and prestige of that nation. U.S. moral posturing may be able to counter some of the reasons for proliferating, but it does not eliminate them.

Minimal Deterrence Increases the Attractiveness of Nuclear Weapons

Contrary to the intentions of its advocates, a minimal deterrence stance of 1000 or fewer nuclear warheads does not reduce the value of nuclear weapons, but instead makes them more prominent. It increases the value of such weapons by reducing the number of warheads needed to gain a substantial benefit and thus reducing the threshold for acquiring

³⁶ Senator Dirk Kempthorne, "Briefing on Results of the Nuclear Posture Review." Hearing Before the Committee on Armed Services - United States Senate 103rd Congress, September 22, 1994, y 4.ar 5/3:

a useful nuclear force. This serves to increase the incentive to proliferate: the antithesis of the intended outcome.

Those advocating lower force levels fail to realize that this reduces the gap between the U.S. arsenal and those of other nations. The closer this gap becomes, the more likely it is that these nations believe that their forces will achieve some level of parity with the arsenals of the U.S. and other major nuclear powers. Countries may then decide that the advantages of the acquisition of nuclear weapons are greater than the international rebuke they will receive for doing so. Advocates “often argue that ‘numbers don’t matter,’ that is, that any nuclear retaliatory threat sufficient to destroy most of an adversary’s cities is sufficient to satisfy national needs. But this kind of argument...transmits an impression abroad that 10 or 20 nuclear warheads, by the same standards, would still be very significant.”³⁷

It must be recognized that sufficiency for deterrence is not the same as desirability.³⁸ If 1,000 weapons are enough to deter attacks against the U.S. this can be said to be a sufficient number of warheads. This may not, however, be the desirable level. More warheads might have additional benefits such as making the U.S. arsenal seem untouchable and thus increasing the threshold of nuclear utility.

S.HRG.103-870, p. 4.

³⁷ George H. Questor and Victor A. Utgoff. “U.S. Arms Reductions and Nuclear Nonproliferation: The Counterproductive Possibilities.” Washington Quarterly. Vol. 16, No. 1, Winter 1993, p. 126.

It would be impossible for any nation to catch up to the United States or Russia in terms of total force levels. The U.S. and Russia are just now moving from five digits down to four whereas most nations are struggling for a single warhead. However, if the United States and Russia lower their arsenals to the levels marginalists want, the gap is greatly lessened. Countries considering whether or not to achieve nuclear status might forego the trouble of being a nuclear nation if they feel that the benefits are less than the costs, but if it only takes a small number of nuclear weapons to gain power equal to the major powers the country is likely to push ahead. If “numbers don’t matter” then “the first 100 bombs any nation acquires are much more significant than an incremental move from 3,900 to 4,000 (almost everyone might agree with this), and/or that these first 100 bombs might almost be enough to deter and cancel out the relevance of larger arsenals (...certainly a big boost for potential proliferators).”³⁹ This is not the signal that should be sent abroad.

The problem with this “numbers don’t matter” thinking is that it creates a greater leveling effect. A few nuclear weapons come to be seen as equally beneficial to a large number. In this way, nations come to believe that they can keep up with the larger nations and thus are more

³⁸ Ivo H. Daadler, “What Vision for the Nuclear Future?” *Washington Quarterly*. Vol. 18, No. 2, Spring 1995, p. 127.

³⁹ Questor & Utgoff, Winter 1993.

likely to pursue nuclear weapons than if they felt that their development would still leave them far behind.

As the gap between the superpowers and the rest of the world gets smaller, the incentives to proliferate increase. The threshold of nuclear utility is thus lowered and more nations will attempt to gain the benefits of becoming a nuclear power. Maintaining both current force levels and the quality of the current U.S. weapons will continue to make the U.S. nuclear arsenal appear difficult to match. This has the effect of increasing the threshold and deterring proliferation. “If we wish to make a maximum contribution to discouraging proliferation, it may be very important to steer the strategic discussion in a direction where the numbers and quality of nuclear weapons matter...”⁴⁰

The most effective way to stop proliferation is to change the decision calculus. Countries pursue nuclear weapons because they believe that they grant them power. If the power granted can be minimized and the costs maximized, the equation is more likely to result in the foregoing of nuclear status altogether.⁴¹ Increasing or maintaining the nuclear utility threshold is on step that can be taken to decrease the benefits of going nuclear.

⁴⁰ Questor & Utgoff, Winter 1993.

⁴¹ Strain, p. 59. Also Questor & Utgoff, October 1994, p. 2.

Minimal Deterrence Decreases Deterrence Credibility

A reduction in nuclear weapons to 1,000 or fewer would force changes in the U.S. force posture. Current targeting methods would become harder to maintain and the United States would be forced to rely more heavily upon existential deterrence. Such a strategy is based on the belief that nuclear weapons are so dangerous that the mere existence of them will deter an enemy from attacking. This is dangerous logic. It increases the value of nuclear weapons and reduces the credibility of U.S. nuclear deterrence.

For decades, the U.S. has targeted its weapons on the nuclear and conventional military forces of its enemies. This is known as counterforce targeting. The president has agreed to target U.S. nuclear weapons at the ocean in the event of an accidental launch, but assuming that a crisis erupts, the U.S. would currently revert to counterforce targeting. The current momentum toward minimal deterrence threatens to reverse this trend. If policy is allowed to move in this direction, “the United States will likely drift toward a policy of ‘existential deterrence,’ with much smaller nuclear stockpiles (on the order of 1,000 to 2,000 weapons)...”⁴² Further, along with lower numbers, the diversity of forces may be significantly reduced and the strategic triad⁴³ may even be

⁴² Patrick Garrity & Sharon Weiner, “U.S. Defense Strategy After the Cold War.” Washington Quarterly, Spring 1992, p. 57.

⁴³ The triad consists of land-based, air-based, and submarine-based nuclear weapons.

forfeited.⁴⁴ Already Les Aspin proposed the elimination of all land-based nuclear weapons.⁴⁵

If the U.S. has only a small number of nuclear weapons, it will not have the flexibility to use them for counterforce targeting. Baker Spring calculates that there are approximately 1,300 targets which should be considered under a damage-limitation, counterforce strategy.⁴⁶ To ensure that each of these targets is destroyed in the case of a war, a two-to-one ratio should be established, meaning that 2,600 warheads are necessary. It is then obvious that a minimal deterrence nuclear posture cannot cover such a target-base. Instead, it will force the adoption of another form of targeting known as countervalue deterrence.⁴⁷ Countervalue targeting is based largely on the threat of massive retaliation and requires substantially fewer warheads.

Countervalue means targeting items of similar value to that which is lost. In real terms, this is the city-busting mode of targeting. The theory is based on the belief that if the potential damage done to another country (usually complete annihilation of a large portion of the

⁴⁴ Maintaining a triad of nuclear forces is necessary in case of a crisis. If a crisis were to emerge, "We'd be more secure with a triad of strategic forces." Without ICBMs, placing bombers on alert would make them vulnerable to SLBM attack, but the ICBM-bomber synergy would help to dissuade such an attack. Albert Carnesale, *Shaping Nuclear Policy for the 1990s: A Compendium of Views*. Report of the Defense Policy Panel of the Committee on Armed Services - House of Representatives 102nd Congress, December 17, 1992, y4.ar5/2 N88/5, p. 115.

⁴⁵ Les Aspin, "From Deterrence to De-nuking: A New Nuclear Policy for the 1990s", January 21, 1992, pp. 21-23.

⁴⁶ Baker Spring, "What the Pentagon's Nuclear Doctrine Review Should Say." [Heritage Foundation Reports Backgrounder #987](#), May 26, 1994.

population) is sufficient, that country will not be willing to take the risk of war.

Most advocates of countervalue targeting believe that the weapons will never truly be used. Thus, it is the existence of these weapons, not the use, that deters the enemy. In essence, existential deterrence is a bluff. A bluff may be appropriate in poker, but it is totally inappropriate when the stakes are the lives of millions or even billions of lives. A bluff may always be called. Additionally, because these are weapons, there must be a plan for their use if their threat is to be believed. The mere existence of such weapons does not necessitate that their use will be believable and if it is not, the risks that the bluff will be called become even greater.⁴⁸

Such thinking is dangerous, especially if it is transmitted to the world at large as it would be if the U.S. adopted it. To make nuclear weapons seem so powerful that a few of them will deter an enemy by their mere existence communicates to would-be proliferators that the benefits of developing a nuclear weapon is worth the costs. This comes “with an implicit message that the countervalue impact of nuclear weapons is so much to be feared that any military applications are to be

⁴⁷ Michael Mazarr. “Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War.” Eugene Wittkopf, ed. The Future of American Foreign Policy. (New York: St. Martin’s Press). 1994, p 301.

⁴⁸ Sir Hugh Beach, “What Stakes Would Justify the Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction?” After the Cold War: Questioning the Morality of Nuclear Deterrence. Charles W. Kegley, Jr. And Kenneth L. Schrab, editors. (Coulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 40-41.

dispensed with.”⁴⁹ The world will view this stance as placing great value in a small numbers of nuclear weapons. Even if a country can only acquire a minimal number of crude weapons, it will believe that the power granted by them is immense. The attractiveness of nuclear weapons is thus increased. The more attractive these weapons are, the more likely that the calculus will favor their development.

Countervalue targeting and the implied notion of existential deterrence is also dangerous because it decreases the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent by deterring itself. If the U.S. is to successfully deter anyone from attacking another nation or using WMD by threatening retaliation, the threat must be credible. Unfortunately, countervalue targeting is not credible. The U.S. will never launch nuclear weapons against a city. The civilian deaths would be enormous. Even beyond the moral reasons, in this age of instant-media coverage of the globe there is no way that such a decision would ever be made.

It is well known that the U.S. has little desire to use its nuclear weapons. As the only nation to have used them in war, the United States does not want to be the first nation to break a 50 year taboo on their use. Existential deterrence is essentially a bluff, but the weapons are supposed to be so dangerous that no one will risk calling it. But what if someone does? What if another nation decides that the U.S. won't

⁴⁹ Questor & Utgoff, Winter 1993.

launch its nuclear warheads? The U.S. would then be put in the position of either launching its weapons or losing forever the credibility of its deterrent.

What are the chances that the U.S. would truly launch if attacked? If the U.S. homeland were attacked, the chances would be quite high, but what if it were an ally? What if the attack were not nuclear but rather chemical, biological, or even conventional? Would the U.S. launch strategic nuclear weapons in retaliation as promised? Would the deterrent then be seen as credible? It is unlikely. Lewis Dunn articulates several reasons why this is true:

Any U.S. president's likely reluctance to go down in history as the second U.S. president to use nuclear weapons, domestic popular calls not to take an eye-for-an-eye, all but certain pressures from allies and neighboring countries not to respond in kind, likely environmental impacts, and a perceived general American weakness of will could all be seen as greatly reducing the danger that a nuclear retaliatory threat would be carried out.⁵⁰

The U.S. retaliation, then, would not be believed and other nations would be willing to take the risk that there would be no large-scale U.S. response. As stated earlier, if the aggressive nation has WMD, the U.S. may not respond at all out of fear of these weapons.

Further adding to the failure of U.S. deterrence policy would be the notion that the retaliation is not in-kind. Strategic nuclear weapons are

⁵⁰ Lewis A. Dunn. "Rethinking the Nuclear Equation: The United States and the New Nuclear Powers." Washington Quarterly. Vol. 17, No. 1, Winter 1994, p. 2.

viewed as disproportionate to biological and chemical weapons.⁵¹ The current strategic nuclear arsenal is viewed as too large and disproportionate to the threat. This has the effect of self-deterrence.⁵² This might be true even in the case of a nuclear attack. If the threatening nuclear weapon were used against allies or U.S. military forces, the use of large-scale standoff nuclear weapons to destroy a city would be too disproportionate to be thinkable.

Reducing the size and scope of the U.S. nuclear arsenal not only increases the value of individual nuclear weapons, but would also force reliance upon countervalue targeting. Holding cities hostage to our nuclear weapons would have the likely effect of self-deterrence. The U.S. would have no proportional way to respond to a WMD or even an overwhelming conventional attack against deployed forces or an allied country.

Minimal Deterrence Increases Reliance on Conventional Deterrence

With the self-deterring nature of minimal nuclear deterrence, the U.S. might be tempted to rely more on conventional weapons. It has been suggested that the United States forego nuclear deterrence altogether in favor of conventional deterrence.⁵³ Such a course would be

⁵¹ Lawrence Freedman. "Great Powers, Vital Interests and Nuclear Weapons." *Survival*. Vol 36, no. 4, Winter 1994-95, p. 39.

⁵² Ritcheson, p. 42-3.

⁵³ See Dunn for an example of this. Dunn argues that the U.S. should commit to no first use and use exclusively conventional forces for deterrent purposes.

dangerous. Conventional weapons cannot replace nuclear weapons, but must instead be used to supplement them. Conventional weapons alone, or in combination with an unusable nuclear deterrent only increase the likelihood of proliferation and rogue nations taking aggressive action.

Part of the reason why minimal deterrence is proposed is that it will reduce the reliance upon nuclear weapons. The U.S. conventional forces are believed to be powerful enough that there is no longer a need for nuclear forces which are disproportionately powerful. If minimal deterrence is adopted, this thinking will likely become more widespread and reliance upon conventional deterrence will increase. Additionally, as previously stated, minimal deterrence reduces the usability of nuclear weapons by creating a situation where city-busting is the only retaliatory option. With these weapons less usable, the reliance on conventional weapons systems will increase. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The fear that nuclear weapons are disproportionate causes events which reduces proportional response options and increases reliance on non-nuclear capabilities.

The current status of U.S. conventional forces is not one which could support a completely conventional stance even if it were desirable. The high-tech juggernaut which decisively won the Gulf War may not exist for much longer. The General Accounting Office recently concluded that the force requirements to fight two major, nearly-simultaneous wars

was under funded by \$150 billion over the next five years.⁵⁴ Other peaceful operations such as refugee efforts and the latest NATO mission to Bosnia threaten to further reduce military readiness and operational capability. To restrict U.S. nuclear options at such a time is to invite disaster.

Conventional weapons lack the ability to deter that is possessed by nuclear weapons. There is a difference between defending something by making it difficult to take and threatening to inflict such immense punishment if they take it that someone would not even consider trying.⁵⁵ Nuclear weapons work in the second manner while conventional weapons operate in the first.⁵⁶ Conventional weapons attempt to force compliance whereas nuclear weapons deter. By their nature, conventional weapons are not awesome enough to stop an aggressor from going to war.

Additionally, conventional deterrence must be renewed. The deterrence provided by these weapons “has a limited shelf life.”⁵⁷ Every so often a country decides that it can overcome the conventional forces of its enemies and begins a war. The Gulf War probably renewed the value of U.S. conventional deterrence for a while, but it will be forgotten before long. Conventional forces can delay a war, but not prevent it. They do

⁵⁴ Cambone, et al, p. 92.

⁵⁵ Waltz, p. 3.

not make an aggressor back away from a war, but rather just make sure that his/her forces are sufficient to win.

Conventional weapons do not deter. History has shown this time and time again. The defender may have overwhelming conventional forces and still the attack will take place. Conventional weapons, despite all of the technological wizardry shown in the Gulf War, cannot fulfill every mission. Countermeasures to nuclear weapons must completely neutralize the effects of the weapon. In a conventional war, they must only sufficiently blunt the attack to allow key items to survive. Merely burying a command center in an underground bunker may be sufficient to guarantee protection from conventional weapons.⁵⁸ This can have enough of an offsetting effect that an aggressor will be willing to go to war.

Nuclear weapons deter war because their power is immense. Even the smallest nuclear weapons represent a “virtually inviolable threshold.”⁵⁹ This serves to enhance the deterrent value. While the U.S. must attempt to reduce the power bestowed upon individual weapons as much as it can by not reducing its arsenal too greatly, it must admit that there is some almost mythical aura surrounding nuclear weapons.

⁵⁶ Major William S. Higgins, USAF. “Deterrence After the Cold War.” Airpower Journal. Summer 1993, p. 50.

⁵⁷ Higgins, p. 56.

⁵⁸ Charles Allen, “Extended Conventional Deterrence: In from the Cold and Out of the Nuclear Fire?” Washington Quarterly Summer 1994, p. 210 and Kathleen Bailey, “Why We Have to Keep the Bomb.” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January/February 1995.

Conventional weapons could be said to be linear in their power. While they are capable of creating virtually the same levels of destruction that nuclear weapons are, this is only possible in the aggregate. Only if employed in massive numbers will they deal the same level of damage as a nuclear strike. This is problematic for the proponents of conventional deterrence because this means that a conventional war, even a large-scale one, does not offer the swift, apocalyptic destruction of nuclear war. One can always surrender or back down in a conventional war without major losses.

This is not so with a nuclear exchange. Once the weapons have been launched, the damage is done. It happens all at once and there is no way to call “uncle” before the destruction comes. It is the ability of nuclear weapons to dole out absolute damage in a single strike that gives them the ability to deter whereas conventional weapons, lacking such an absolute threshold, can only compel. Even small, tactical nuclear weapons are more powerful than conventional weapons. They still have an absolute threshold, although much less than that of a strategic warhead.

Additionally, it is much easier to recover from a conventional war than from one involving nuclear weapons. The Gulf War proves this fact. “Despite repeated heavy bombing during the 1991 Gulf War, Iraqi

⁵⁹ Higgins, p. 53.

airfields were quickly repaired.”⁶⁰ Allied airfields were similarly reconstituted during World War II. Even the Iraqi facility “destroyed” by forty Tomahawk cruise missiles was reconstructed in three months.⁶¹

Utilizing only conventional forces may actually increase the risks of proliferation. As General K. Sundarji,⁶² of the Indian Army is said to have stated after the Gulf War, the superiority of U.S. conventional forces displayed mean only that it would be foolish to fight the U.S. without nuclear weapons.⁶³ Superior conventional forces only serve to increase the incentives to gain WMD capability of some sort before engaging the United States. Again, they do not deter war, they only delay it until the forces can be made more even. This is where the idea of a leveling effect comes into play. If the nuclear utility threshold is low as it would be under minimal deterrence, the number of weapons needed to even the odds becomes small and achievable. If the nuclear utility threshold is high, most countries will decide that they cannot achieve parity with the U.S. arsenal and decide to forego development.

Relying on minimal deterrence risks relying on conventional weapons for most or all capabilities. A small number of large nuclear weapons is not a credible deterrent because it is seen to be unusable. To

⁶⁰ Bailey, p. 36.

⁶¹ Wall Street Journal, March 12, 1993, p. A1.

⁶² An interesting note is that this General is the same one who trying to link reductions in the Indian nuclear program to the U.S. program. Such a statement is inconsistent with the above claim. This seems to lend credibility to Bailey’s argument that such nations are merely using these linkages are diplomatic tools and are not serious about them.

overcome this credibility gap, the U.S. will likely rely more heavily upon conventional weapons in hopes of deterring war and WMD use through non-nuclear means. Such a decision would serve only to increase the risks of war and proliferation.

Minimal Deterrence Causes Allied Proliferation

Not only does minimal deterrence increase the likelihood that aggressor and rogue nations will pursue the nuclear option, but it may cause allied nations to decide that the U.S. nuclear umbrella is ineffective and that they would be safer to pursue a domestic nuclear program. Nations who might consider such a route include Japan, South Korea, and Germany. These nations would follow such a path if they felt that the U.S. deterrent were insufficiently credible to protect them.

A strategy which relies upon existential deterrence or conventional deterrence would be insufficient to assure allied nations of their security. Neither option would be viewed as a credible deterrent. Existential deterrence is self-deterring and thus the promised use of nuclear weapons is unbelievable. For reasons discussed above, conventional deterrence is not viewed as a sufficient deterrent either. They may be able to dissuade an attack, but they cannot deter it. Furthermore,

⁶³ Questor & Utgoff, April 1994.

dissuasion requires a large commitment which will become more and more difficult to maintain in these days of tight budgets.

Independent nuclear programs are most likely in regions where U.S. security guarantees have come to be doubted.⁶⁴ When the U.S. takes actions that reduce its nuclear capabilities, these allied nations feel threatened and turn to domestic defenses. Only a strong nuclear umbrella can reassure them.⁶⁵

A credible U.S. nuclear umbrella is critical to Japan's decision to forego nuclear weapons. "An important aspect of Japan's continuing nuclear allergy is the Japanese reliance on the US nuclear umbrella."⁶⁶ Japan has a large nuclear power industry, many well-versed nuclear scientists, and a ready supply of plutonium. If it felt threatened, as it would if the U.S. nuclear umbrella were removed or lost credibility, Japan could build a nuclear weapon in a very short time.⁶⁷ Should Japan decide to move in such a direction, it could well be disastrous. A nuclear Japan would threaten many of its neighbors who still vividly remember what Japan did to them during World War II. They may decide to pursue nuclear weapons to counter the Japanese threat. What would result is the simultaneous destabilization of the region's security

⁶⁴ Freedman, p. 46.

⁶⁵ Mazarr, p. 11.

⁶⁶ "Ministry denies bid to gain nuclear weapons," South China Morning Post, February 1, 1994.

⁶⁷ "The rule of thumb among nuclear experts in Washington is that Japan could produce a nuclear device in 30 days if it so chose." - Larry Pressler, "Nuclear proliferation Obfuscation." Washington Times, January 11, 1994, p. A15.

balance and a race for nuclear weapons.⁶⁸ Such a combination is intensely dangerous.

South Korea is in a similar situation. “Seoul has only been persuaded to resist launching its own nuclear program by Washington’s promise that South Korea is protected by the U.S. nuclear umbrella.”⁶⁹ South Korea could not develop domestic nuclear weapons as quickly as Japan, but the risks of it embarking along that path are even greater. Should South Korea reverse its non-nuclear status, shockwaves would be sent throughout Southeast Asia. Most directly, North Korea would surely renew its nuclear program. Many other nations would follow suit and the region would quickly become a nuclear powderkeg. It has been called the “rim of fire” because of its potential for nuclear conflict. South Korean nuclear weapons could be the match that sets the region aflame. As Aaron Friedberg put it when discussing the possible results of a nuclear-armed Korea, “A rapid, multifaceted expansion in nuclear capabilities could increase the dangers of misperception, miscalculation, and war.”⁷⁰

Germany presents another possible danger zone should the United States’ nuclear umbrella begin to lose believability. Germany is not as sure as the United States that the Russian threat is over. They fear the

⁶⁸ Henry D. Sokolski, Testimony Before the U. S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Subcommittee on International Finance and Monetary Policy, February 3, 1994.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Manthorpe, Montreal Gazette, November 9, 1993.

rise to power of a radical leader who would once again threaten the security of Western Europe. "They plead with us to keep NATO together and maintain the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Europe."⁷¹ As such, the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent is required to assuage these fears. If the United States fails to maintain the believability of its security blanket over Europe, Germany might decide that it must go it alone and initiate domestic programs to enhance its defense. Such actions could have destabilizing effects on much of Europe.

The reduction of the U.S. nuclear arsenal to 1,000 or fewer nuclear weapons would decrease the ability of the U.S. to base these weapons anywhere but in the United States. Nuclear security guarantees would then have to be based out of the United States. Many nations do not find this reassuring because they feel that without weapons in the area, the U.S. will too easily decide not to act at all. Extended deterrence based upon intercontinental systems is not seen to be credible.⁷² It is true that the U.S. is currently reducing its overseas nuclear deployment, but they are still in such a condition that the extended portion of the deterrent force could be reconstituted quickly in the case of a crisis. The more the U.S. arsenal is restricted, the less likely this reconstitution becomes.

⁷⁰ Aaron Friedberg, International Security, Fall 1993, p. 25.

⁷¹ James Goldsborough, "Communism Comes Back To Life: Anxieties and economic pain create a surprising thirst for the old system." San Diego Union-Tribune, September 23, 1993.

⁷² Ritcheson, p. 45.

Minimal deterrence then can be seen to promote, not limit WMD proliferation. It increases the incentives to acquire such weapons while at the same time undermining the credibility of U.S. response to their use. This has the aggregate effect of increasing the chances of proliferation both among rogue states and among allied nations. Sharply reducing the nuclear arsenal and options of the United States is then not the way to combat the risks of WMD proliferation.

Restructuring U.S. Nuclear Forces to Counter Proliferation⁷³

Instead of reducing its nuclear arsenal in an attempt to gain some moral high ground to combat proliferation, it is preferable that the United States restructure its nuclear forces and targeting strategies to reduce the incentives for proliferation. If the reasons to acquire nuclear weapons are outweighed by the costs, proliferation can be stopped. To this end, the U.S. should avoid reducing its arsenal too far, it should develop a new tier of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons, and it should switch to a counterpower instead of counter-value targeting policy. The combination of these changes would be to increase the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent while lowering the value of WMD to other nations.

⁷³ This is distinct from counter-proliferation as defined by the Counter-Proliferation Initiative (CPI).

The U.S. must maintain both a quantitative and qualitative advantage in its nuclear force compared to those of others. The smaller this gap, the more likely nations are to believe that a small nuclear arsenal can overcome it.⁷⁴ The exact number of weapons required for this mission is hard to qualify, but it should certainly be enough to maintain a large gap between the forces of the U.S. and others. It would be better to err on the side of too many weapons for which there is little or no risk than to maintain too few weapons and risk sending the wrong signal to the world. There is no danger in having too many weapons as there is in having too few.

When determining the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, one must be careful to determine the number of weapons from a “zero based budget” - i.e. assess the threats and targets and determine the size of the arsenal based upon that rather than determining the targets based upon the number of warheads available. The first is more likely to maintain a credible deterrent whereas the second, politically-based approach addresses deterrence and the role of weapons as a secondary consideration. It is much more likely that a politically-motivated arsenal reduction will go too far than one based upon real and potential

⁷⁴ Questor & Utgoff, Winter 1993.

threats.⁷⁵ One must also base this target choice upon capabilities, not upon intent. Russia currently has little intent to use its weapons, but a change in leadership could quickly reverse that. Its capabilities are still immense. The U.S. must take that into account in its decisions, not just the current wave of democratization.

Without access to classified documents, it is difficult to determine the correct size and nature of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Baker Spring, an analyst for the Heritage foundation determines that there are approximately 1,300 targets which should be targeted in what he calls a “damage limitation strategy” which is essentially targeting enemy “strategic military and related targets to be destroyed in case of war.” Spring calculates that a three-to-one ratio of warheads-to-targets is necessary under the status quo. This leads to a necessity of around 4,000 warheads. If the U.S. chooses to implement a strategic defense system, as is currently being planned, the added survivability of the forces will lower that ratio to two-to-one and the number of required warheads to 2,600.⁷⁶ These numbers are close to those suggested by START II.

A targeting package such as the one suggested by Spring would have the advantages of being large enough and flexible enough to

⁷⁵ Ralph Earle II, , “Shaping Nuclear Policy for the 1990s: A Compendium of Views.” Report of the Defense Policy Panel of the Committee on Armed Services - House of Representatives 102nd Congress, December 17, 1992, y4.ar5/2 N88/5, pp. 225-226.

maintain both deterrence credibility and a high nuclear utility threshold. Weapons would not be seen as a danger, but rather as a tool to combat proliferation and to deter aggression. Such a role would increase the nuclear threshold by making the U.S. arsenal unparalleled and unreachable.

The U.S. should also maintain the quality of its weapons systems. Speed and accuracy requirements would suggest maintaining the most modern weapons such as the MX and Trident II missile systems.⁷⁷ A complete triad of delivery systems is required including sea-based, land-based, and air-based weapons systems.⁷⁸ ICBM's are not credible for extended deterrence, air systems can be preemptively destroyed by an aggressor and submarines are not obvious enough to form an effective deterrent by themselves. All three systems should be utilized together. If the U.S. can maintain its technological lead in weapons systems, the rudimentary forces achievable by developing nuclear nations will look much less useful. Such a gap, given the costs of developing nuclear weapons and the general global antagonism to new nuclear powers, would make the nation much less likely to acquire the weapons in the first place.

⁷⁶ Spring, May 1994.

⁷⁷ Spring, October 1994.

⁷⁸ Aerospace Daily, January 7, 1993.

Large-scale nuclear weapons and their value as existential deterrents are no longer credible. Their use is hard to believe, especially in response to a non-nuclear threat such as chemical or biological weapons. The United States should develop a tier of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons that are more proportional to the expected WMD uses. The use of these weapons is more believable and thus the deterrent value is much greater than an unusable multi-megaton weapon.

As the current situation in Europe proves, people only want nuclear weapons around when they are in need of their protection. Germany proved how schizophrenic local populations can be by greatly desiring U.S. nuclear forces when the threat was nearby, but quickly demanding their withdrawal as soon as the threat receded. The U.S. can expect future situations to be similar. The U.S. must develop forces that can take this variance in public sentiment into account by deploying quickly to the needed area and then being withdrawn once the threat dissipates. Forward positioning of nuclear forces has the advantage of being more credible. If U.S. nuclear forces are in the area it serves notice to possible aggressors that the U.S. is willing to act against aggression. U.S. allies have traditionally felt more assured by the physical presence of American forces than by strategic nuclear forces based in the United States.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Questor & Utgoff, April 1994.

Low-yield tactical nuclear weapons would solve the largest flaw in the current U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy—the disproportionate response. Failure to maintain and develop new theater nuclear systems would be to forego the U.S. control of escalation.⁸⁰ Only by being able to control escalation and thus make it proportional to the aggressor's actions can the U.S. hope to deter others rather than itself. These new nuclear weapons would hold collateral damage to a minimum by reducing the yield and thus making them more proportional to the attacker's weapons.⁸¹

Nuclear weapons have already proven that they can deter chemical and biological weapons attacks. Recent defections from Iraq indicate what many suspected, that Saddam Hussein had chemical capabilities but chose not to use them out of fear that the U.S. would respond with nuclear weapons.⁸² Such a deterrent effect could be maximized by small-yield nuclear warheads that are more proportional to chemical or biological attacks. Conventional weapons are insufficient and the current nuclear arsenal is too large and destructive. Small nuclear weapons could be a more credible and proportionate response to such attacks.⁸³

⁸⁰ Questor & Utgoff, Winter 1993.

⁸¹ David Nichols, Defense News, February 14, 1993.

⁸² Ritcheson, p. 44.

⁸³ Ritcheson, p. 45.

Tactical nuclear weapons thus would greatly increase the U.S. deterrence by creating a more proportional response which would deter aggressor nations and not itself. In the case of an actual incident, these weapons would also reduce the aggressor's ability to play wounded. There would be few or no civilian casualties to parade across global television. Additionally such weapons could be used to supplement conventional forces in taking out hardened targets such as underground bunkers.

Another option for increasing the deterrent value of the U.S. arsenal is to change targeting tactics. Three main tactics are currently being discussed. These are countervalue, counterpower, and counterforce. Countervalue targeting targets another nation's cities making an attack very costly; too costly in fact so that the deterrent loses believability. Counterforce targeting is designed to target enemy nuclear weapons systems. This targeting strategy is problematic because it increases the fears of a preemptive first strike to disable an enemy's nuclear systems before launching an attack of one's own. The optimal targeting package may be counterpower. This strategy targets enemy *non-nuclear* military forces—standing armies, military bases, military-related industrial complexes.⁸⁴ Such an approach would be more believable than aiming at the general population but would avoid the

⁸⁴ Mazarr, p. 304.

worries of counterforce targeting. It would have additional deterrent effect against “crazy leaders” who care not for their populations, but would worry if their military were reduced to ashes. It would hit them where they would feel it most.

Conclusion

The United States is currently on a course to lower its nuclear forces to unprecedented low force levels. If the marginalists continue to have their way, the U.S. will soon adopt a strategy of minimal deterrence, dropping to 1,000 or fewer warheads. Such a strategy is based upon the belief that nuclear weapons are too dangerous and should be reduced as far as possible if not eliminated completely. Reducing the number of weapons will theoretically give the U.S. a stronger moral stick to wield against nations considering WMD proliferation. The truth, however, is the opposite. Reducing the U.S. nuclear arsenal too far runs the risk of increasing the value of nuclear weapons, reducing deterrence credibility, increasing reliance on inadequate conventional weapons systems, and eroding extended deterrence. The cumulative effect of these actions will be to raise the perceived value of nuclear weapons and thus increase the likelihood that nations will shun world opinion and develop WMD systems.

Minimal deterrence is a wrong-headed notion that will lead to more harm than good. Instead of fearing nuclear weapons and trying to get as close to complete disarmament as possible, it would be better to accept them as facts of life and structure deterrence policy around protecting U.S. and allied interests. Maintaining a large and modern force of weapons, developing low-yield tactical weapons and shifting to a counterpower targeting strategy would all serve U.S. anti-proliferation goals as well as blunt the effects of proliferation if it does take place.

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