

Why We Must Sustain Nuclear Deterrence  
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Since the end of the Cold War, American policy makers have sought to align the U.S. nuclear deterrent posture with the emerging requirements of the new strategic environment. The Clinton administration has emphasized engagement over deterrence, and conventional weapons over nuclear forces. Indeed, nuclear weapons have been deemphasized significantly. And, of course, the call for complete nuclear disarmament has been energized by prominent retired military officers such as General Butler, the former head of the Strategic Command. Typically, it is far cheaper in treasure and lives to deter a war rather than to fight a war. This point cannot be overstated. Deterrence was at the heart of U.S. security policy during the Cold War; it will be equally important, possibly more so as we face regional challengers armed with chemical, biological, and/or nuclear weapons—weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

A single illustration of the lethality of biological weapons will clarify why the U.S. capability to deter regional challengers is of paramount importance: a single undeterred attacker employing as little as 20 kilograms of dispersed anthrax drifting downwind could, under the proper conditions, cause the deaths of 50 percent of the unprotected population in an area of more than 150 square miles. Such a biological attack against the unprotected populations of ten large U.S. urban areas could kill on the order of 20 million Americans. To risk understatement, deterrence is not less important in this post-Cold War period. In the absence of a revived great power competition, the most taxing likely role for U.S. deterrence policy will be deterring the use of WMD by hostile regional powers. What is the future role for nuclear weapons in regional deterrence? There are numerous recent confident assertions by prominent persons that U.S. conventional forces can reliably replace nuclear forces for deterrence of all but nuclear threats. Consequently, they conclude that nuclear weapons are largely unnecessary for regional deterrence. Such assertions ring hollow; they are speculative and unsupported by actual evidence. The evidence that does exist, including recent history, suggests

strongly that when a challenger is highly motivated, and cost- and risk-tolerant, nuclear weapons can be essential to deterring WMD attacks. What, for example, was the value of nuclear weapons for deterrence in the Gulf War? By Iraqi accounts, nuclear deterrence prevented Iraq's use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) that could have inflicted horrendous civilian and military casualties on us and our allies.

Senior Iraqi wartime leaders have explained that while U.S. conventional threats were insufficient to deter, implicit U.S. nuclear threats did deter Saddam Hussein's use of chemical and biological weapons. As the then-head of Iraqi military intelligence, Gen. Waffic al Sammarai, has stated, Saddam Hussein did not use chemical or biological weapons during the war, "because the warning was quite severe, and quite effective. The allied troops were certain to use nuclear arms and the price will be too dear and too high."

Immediately following the Gulf War many prominent U.S. military commentators, such as former Secretary of Defense McNamara, claimed that nuclear weapons were "incredible" and therefore "irrelevant" to the war.<sup>1</sup> This assessment-that U.S. nuclear weapons are irrelevant to regional challengers-is at the heart of the various nuclear disarmament proposals; it also is gravely mistaken.

The continuing proliferation of CBW can only increase our need for nuclear deterrence. The United States has given up chemical and biological weapons, and has thus given up the option of deterring chemical and biological threats with like capabilities. In some tough cases conventional forces alone are likely to be inadequate to deter CBW threats. Consequently, as CBW proliferates our nuclear capabilities become more, not less important for regional deterrence. Clearly, CBW are an inexpensive means of "trumping" Western conventional technical superiority; this is one reason they are so attractive to some developing countries. Ironically, the Western conventional superiority that makes a non-nuclear world and conventional-based deterrence attractive to some Americans is strong motivation for less developed countries to emphasize WMD. The problem, of course, is that U.S. leaders are unlikely to know in advance those conditions and opponents that will necessitate nuclear threats for deterrence success. Not knowing when and where nuclear threats will be essential to deterrence success, they must be available to cast a shadow over any military crisis, to be made more explicit or to remain "under wraps" as the challenger and context warrant. When U.S. operational practices and declaratory policies limit the flexibility of U.S. nuclear forces and the credibility of U.S. nuclear threats, they undermine the prospects for effective deterrence and increase the prospects for regional crises and wars.

In conclusion, U.S. national security policy now is characterized by a general deemphasis on military deterrence, and by an even greater deemphasis on nuclear weapons within the residual deterrent framework. Advanced conventional weapons have assumed the pride of place in DoD's strategy of "shape, respond, and prepare now." And, of course, there have been numerous recent proposals for nuclear disarmament and de-alerting. The arguments underlying these proposals is that military deterrence is of declining relevance to U.S. security, and U.S. conventional forces alone can ensure deterrence of all but nuclear threats. In fact, military deterrence remains enormously important to U.S. security, and in some tough cases a sizeable arsenal of nuclear weapons will be essential to the prospects for effective deterrence.

1. Carl Kaysen, Robert McNamara, and George Rathjens, "Nuclear Weapons after the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Fall 1991), p. 102.