

# Minimum Deterrence, More Danger

*How not to think about nuclear weapons*

BY KEITH B. PAYNE

**P**ROPOSALS for deep reductions in the U.S. nuclear arsenal have been made periodically over the past four decades.

Almost always, the proposals promote a doctrine known as “minimum deterrence.”

The main premise that the case for minimum deterrence rests on is threefold: U.S. nuclear capability does not deter terrorists; Russia and China are no longer enemies and the United States no longer needs nuclear weapons to deter them; and, for deterrence purposes, U.S. advanced conventional forces increasingly can substitute for nuclear forces. Therefore, a relatively small number of U.S. nuclear weapons is adequate for deterrence and we can reduce to hundreds or even a few dozen without jeopardizing national security. Deep reductions, it is asserted, will reduce nuclear dangers, advance U.S. arms-control and nonproliferation goals, and save billions of dollars.

When these claims are examined against available evidence, it is apparent that they are false, implausible, or self-contradictory.

The primary rationale for the claim that reducing U.S. forces carries no risk is the corresponding claim that Russia and China no longer are foes. It is impossible, though, to predict credibly that U.S. relations with Russia and China will be benign in the future, and

it is questionable whether they are so amicable now. Such sanguine hopes are inconsistent with considerable evidence that points to the contrary. For example, Alexei Arbatov, noted Russian defense expert and former deputy chairman of the Russian Duma’s Defense Committee, reports that the beliefs underlying Russian policy include the following: Russia is surrounded by enemies led by the United States; the United States and its allies may invade Russia any time to seize its natural riches; nuclear weapons are the basis for Russian security; and, correspondingly, U.S. calls for nuclear disarmament are a malicious U.S. trick. We may see such beliefs as paranoid nonsense, but according to Arbatov, within Russia they are not controversial.

The related claim that, as a rule, nuclear deterrence is irrelevant to countering terrorism is false. We know that terrorists can be deterred in some circumstances, and we have no reason to dismiss the potential for U.S. nuclear capabilities to help deter their state sponsors.

Similarly, the promise that deterrence will work reliably with a small U.S. nuclear arsenal, now and in the future, is based on little but hope. Deterrence simply is not so predictable. Similarly, no one can claim credibly that U.S. conventional threats can adequately substitute for nuclear threats. The increasing lethality of conventional forces may mean much or nothing for deterrence purposes, depending on how opponents now and in the future view those forces—which, again, is not predictable with any precision. Moreover, available public evidence clearly demonstrates that some states, particularly Russia, China, and North Korea, place great emphasis on nuclear weapons as the only means of defeating U.S. conventional-force advantages. Consequently, the U.S. substitution of advanced conventional capabilities for deterrence purposes would likely lead those countries to emphasize even more their nuclear forces, not follow the U.S. lead toward nuclear disarmament.

Available evidence also contradicts the claims that U.S. nuclear reductions would reduce nuclear accidents or strengthen nonproliferation efforts. A detailed study of the U.S. and Soviet Cold War nuclear arsenals shows no cor-

relation existed between the number of nuclear accidents and the number of weapons in their arsenals.

Further, in some cases U.S. nuclear reductions heighten allies’ misgivings about the credibility of the U.S. “nuclear umbrella” and increase their desire for independent nuclear capabilities—an outcome that would defeat U.S. nonproliferation purposes. Some key allied voices already are expressing such concerns openly. In South Korea, for example, two-thirds of the population now favors an independent South Korean nuclear capability. The head of South Korea’s ruling Saenuri party recently stated, “Possessing nuclear weapons is the best way to counter North Korea’s nuclear threats. It would send a strong political message not only to North Korea but also to China.” Further deep U.S. reductions could inspire a cascade of proliferation among friends and allies who otherwise would likely continue to rely on the U.S. umbrella.

As for the promise that deep reductions in U.S. nuclear weapons would mean substantial savings, it is demonstrably false. Don Cook of the National Nuclear Security Administration recently testified before the House Appropriations Committee that no substantial saving would be possible because the costs for nuclear weapons are largely independent of the number of weapons. In fact, the minimum-deterrence recommendation that the United States substitute advanced conventional threats for nuclear threats would likely lead to a net increase in U.S. defense spending. For example, one conventional strategic capability typically recommended as a substitute for nuclear capability could cost \$5 billion to \$20 billion just to become operational, and many additional conventional-force improvements would be necessary.

In addition, minimum deterrence identifies effective deterrence as a priority goal, but its recommended deep nuclear reductions would degrade the characteristics of the U.S. nuclear arsenal that may be most important for deterrence: the flexibility and diversity necessary to adapt as needed to help deter a spectrum of severe threats across many plausible contemporary and future scenarios. The bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission in its 2009 report emphasized the value

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of U.S. nuclear-force flexibility and diversity for this reason and consequently recommended that the U.S. nuclear “triad” of bombers, ICBMs, and nuclear-missile submarines be preserved.

Flexibility and diversity similarly are linked to the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and deep reductions would threaten to degrade those important qualities. In 2010, General Kevin Chilton, commander of Strategic Command, stated in testimony before the Senate that, at 1,550 deployed warheads, the ceiling of the New START Treaty was the lowest he could endorse given the need to preserve U.S. force flexibility and diversity. Since then, no great benign transformation of international relations has taken place to suggest that the much lower nuclear-force levels recommended by minimum deterrence would be adequate. Indeed, relations with Russia and China have since deteriorated, North Korea now makes explicit nuclear threats to the United States and allies, and Iran continues with its nuclear and missile programs.

Some key minimum-deterrence claims are not just false or implausible, they are self-contradictory. For example, it cannot be true both that nuclear weapons are now irrelevant in our relations with Russia and China and that nuclear-arms-reduction agreements with Russia and China would provide any great direct security benefit to the United States. The United States typically is unconcerned about the number of French or British nuclear weapons and engages in no negotiations concerning them, presumably because they pose no threat to the United States. If U.S. relations with Russia and China are so amicable that nuclear deterrence truly no longer is pertinent, then there is no direct security value in focusing on negotiations to reduce incrementally the number of their nuclear weapons. Yet one of the great benefits of minimum deterrence is said to be that it would facilitate such negotiations.

Finally, the functioning of deterrence is not predictable, and in some cases deterrence will likely fail. Consequently, no plausible level of nuclear reductions could protect U.S. civilian centers; yet minimum-deterrence proponents generally reject U.S. capabilities to defend

against nuclear attack. They claim that such U.S. defensive systems as missile defense hamper movement toward deep nuclear reductions. As such, minimum-deterrence policies would make deterrence more likely to fail while simultaneously denying the United States defensive systems that might provide some protection in the event deterrence does fail. This would be the worst of all worlds. The recent severe nuclear-missile threats from North Korea are a reminder of the value of such defenses.

Minimum deterrence is a contemporary analogue of the British ten-year rule. In August 1919, British armed forces were instructed to estimate their requirements and budget “on the assumption that the British Empire would not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years.” Based on this hopeful prediction and optimistic expectations for naval-disarmament negotiations with the United States, France, Japan, and Italy, British naval allocations were cut by 85 percent between 1919 and 1923. The British government did not rescind the ten-year rule until 1932, when it became painfully clear that its premise did not fit reality. Even then it warned that defense spending should not be increased. Of course, seven years later Britain was struggling for its existence with a resurgent Germany and was ill prepared in part because of the ten-year rule, which deferred prudent military preparation and codified hope.

Although minimum deterrence is very much akin to the ten-year rule, its proponents have yet to reconsider their own hope-based predictions. Their recommendations would produce obligatory U.S. reductions and make recovery and adjustment difficult, lengthy, and costly in the event of a darker future than predicted. And they would do so at a time when Russia and China are modernizing their nuclear capabilities vigorously while explicitly threatening U.S. allies and naming the United States as their primary opponent. Meanwhile, rogue states threaten the United States and its allies while moving forward with nuclear capabilities. If we hope to deter wars as effectively as possible in such an environment, minimum deterrence should not be our policy. **NR**



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