

## **Should the priority goal of US nuclear policy be to abolish nuclear weapons?**

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The priority goal of US nuclear policy should *not* be to abolish nuclear weapons. That goal involves extreme dangers that typically go unspoken, but are critical to its serious consideration.

Since World War II, US nuclear deterrence capabilities have, without a doubt, helped to prevent and limit wars. Evidence in this regard is overwhelming. Correspondingly, since the establishment of nuclear deterrence after World War II, there has been a dramatic reduction in the percentage of combat deaths worldwide from the relatively high levels that had prevailed for centuries. That is an historic accomplishment. For example, during the first half of the twentieth century, absent nuclear deterrence to prevent war, two world wars caused 80-100 million deaths in a dozen years of combat. Another world war fought with modern conventional, chemical and biological weapons would lead to far greater death and destruction. It must be deterred.

Proponents of nuclear disarmament appeal for a new, more cooperative world order that would no longer need nuclear deterrence to prevent world war. But such appeals have never created a cooperative world order and there is no evidence they ever will. In response to earlier activism for nuclear abolition, Winston Churchill responded, “Be careful above all things not to let go of the atomic weapon until you are sure and more than sure that other means of preserving peace are in your hands.” The inconvenient truth is that no plausible alternative to nuclear deterrence for preserving peace is foreseeable, much less in hand. Yet, nuclear abolition would eliminate this existing tool known to have moved human history away from its bloody past.

Another reason for not prioritizing nuclear abolition is that numerous countries that would have to agree, instead reject it as a serious goal. Moscow, for example, deems it to be an American “trick” to deny Russia its most critical weapons. Indeed, Russia now, more than ever, emphasizes its nuclear forces for coercion and wartime employment. Correspondingly, US allies place high priority on maintaining the US nuclear deterrence “umbrella” for their security. Echoing Winston Churchill, former French Ambassador to NATO Françoise de Rose observed wryly, “It will be time to think about general and complete nuclear disarmament when human nature has changed.” Precisely so. Prioritizing nuclear abolition now, rather than effective nuclear deterrence, ignores international realities and would undercut the means we know support what must be our highest priority, preventing and limiting war.

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