

Nuclear Deterrence Debate (ESR)

Support For Deterrence

William J. Perry, U.S. Secretary of Defense, March 1996 annual report to the President: “Strategic nuclear deterrence remains a key U.S. military priority. The mission of U.S. strategic nuclear forces is to deter attacks on the United States or its allies and to convince potential adversaries that seeking nuclear advantage would be futile. To do this, the United States must maintain nuclear forces of sufficient size and capability to hold at risk a broad range of assets valued by potentially hostile foreign nations.”

Walter B. Slocombe, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, February 12, 1997: “Nuclear deterrent --survivable against the most aggressive attack, under highly confident constitutional command and control, and assured in its safety against both accident and unauthorized use. . . . Even if we could ignore the Russian nuclear arsenal entirely, there are unfortunately a range of other potential threats to which nuclear weapons are a deterrent. One cannot survey the list of rogue states with potential WMD (weapons of mass destruction) programs and conclude otherwise . . . the knowledge that the U.S. has a powerful and ready nuclear capability is, I believe, a significant deterrent to proliferators to even contemplate the use of WMD.”

Executive Report, U.S. Nuclear Policy in the 21st Century, Institute for National Strategic Studie), July 1988: “Whether we like it or not, nuclear weapons will be part of the global security setting. The knowledge to build them will continue to exist; they cannot be disinvented. Moreover, in some regions - notably South Asia and the Middle East - the value ascribed to demonstrated nuclear prowess has been increasing. The Indian nuclear tests in May 1998 and the rapid Pakistani response demonstrated the resolve of these governments, backed by domestic political opinion, to risk international censure for stated security reasons. The Indian and Pakistani tests may anticipate a long-term trend that would significantly increase the number of the de facto nuclear weapons states. The emergence of more “declared” or “demonstrated” nuclear states may be inevitable.”

Criticism of Deterrence

Center for Defense Information, 1993: “Nuclear weapons serve no military purpose, especially given U.S. superiority in conventional weapons. The United States is the world’s number one military power, with or without its nuclear weapons. The United States’ substantial and powerful nonnuclear forces, as demonstrated in the war against Iraq, can destroy the same targets as nuclear weapons. General Colin Powell expressed the military’s doubts about the value of nuclear weapons: “I think there is far less utility to these (nuclear) weapons than some Third World countries think there is, and they are wasting a lot of money, because what they hope to do militarily with weapons of mass destruction. . . . I can increasingly do with conventional weapons, and far more effectively.”

General Lee Butler, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command until 1994. “Deterrence had this further peculiar quality: it worked best when you needed it least. In periods of relative calm, you could point with pride at deterrence and say, “Look, how splendidly it’s working!” It was in moments of deep crisis that not only did it become irrelevant but all the baggage that came with it - the buildup of forces, the high states of alert - turned the picture absolutely upside down. As you entered the crisis, thoughts of deterrence vanished, and you were simply trying to deal with the classic imponderables of crises. . . . Deterrence, in a word, never operated the way that we imagined or envisioned it would. . . . It led to an open-ended arms race - at that level, it failed utterly.”

Jonathan Schell, The Gift of Time. The principal strategic question is whether the doctrine of deterrence, having been framed during the cold war, will now be discredited as logically absurd and morally bankrupt or, on the contrary, recommended to nations all over the world as the soundest and most sensible solution to the nuclear dilemma. The question then will not be whether a particular quarreling pair of nations (the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War) is better off with nuclear arsenal but whether any and all such pairs (India and Pakistan, Greece and Turkey, Iraq and Israel, or Iran and Iraq will do as examples) are better off. . . . The fundamental choice . . . is between, on the one hand, condemnation of nuclear weapons and their abolition and, on the other, their full normalization and universalization.

Support for Nuclear Weapons Abolition

The Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, Executive Summary (a commission established by the Australian government): The elimination of nuclear weapons must be a global endeavor involving all states. The process followed must ensure that no state feels, at any stage, that further nuclear disarmament is a threat to its security. To this end nuclear weapon elimination should be conducted as a series of phased verified reductions that allow states to satisfy themselves, at each stage of the process, that further movement toward elimination can be made safely and securely.

The first requirement is for the five nuclear weapon states to commit themselves unequivocally to the elimination of nuclear weapons and agree to start work immediately on the practical steps and negotiations required for its achievement. The commitment by the nuclear weapons states to a nuclear weapon free world must be accompanied by a series of practical, realistic and mutually reinforcing steps. There are a number of such steps that can be taken immediately: Taking nuclear forces off alert; Removal of warheads from delivery vehicles; Ending deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons; Ending nuclear testing; Initiating negotiations to further reduce United States and Russian nuclear arsenals; Agreement amongst the nuclear weapon states of reciprocal no first use undertakings, and of a no first use undertaking by them in relation to the non-nuclear states.

Effective verification is critical to the achievement and maintenance of a nuclear weapon free world. Before states agree to eliminate nuclear weapons they will require a high level of confidence that verification arrangements would detect promptly any attempt to cheat the disarmament process. A key element of non-proliferation arrangements for a nuclear weapon free world will be a highly developed capacity to detect undeclared nuclear activity at both declared and undeclared sites.

General George Lee Butler, commander of U.S. Strategic Command until 1994: We need to reflect on how revolutionary ideas get implemented and become evolutionary realities. The first and foremost test is whether, at its very core, the idea makes sense. And I believe that the idea of abolishing nuclear weapons passes that test with flying colors. Today, we are left with the spectacle of democratic societies clinging to the proposition that threats to the lives of tens of millions of people can be reconciled with the underlying tenets of our political philosophy. Why should we accept a bargain whose contractual terms take as commonplace forms of retribution that hold at risk the lives of so many people and threaten the viability of life on the planet? Who can argue that this is the best to which we can aspire? Nuclear weapons are irrational devices. They were rationalized and accepted as a desperate measure in the face of circumstances that were unimaginable. Now as the world evolves rapidly, I think that the vast majority of people on the face of this earth will endorse the proposition that such weapons have no place among us. There is no security to be found in nuclear weapons. It is a fool's game.

A Middle Position On Nuclear Weapons Abolition

Fred Charles Ikle, former director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency: The idea of abolishing nuclear weapons is for many people the first that comes to mind in trying to get out of the nuclear predicament. However, it wouldn't take very long for nations to build nuclear weapons again. You need - in the short term, I believe, a kind of concert of the major nuclear powers to maintain the tradition of nonuse as long as possible, not only among themselves, but to keep all the so-called rogue states from ever using nuclear weapons. These major powers would punish the use of nuclear weapons by rogue states, perhaps by lettering one major party - the most effective one in each case - step forward and respond to prevent any repetition. If, for instance, North Korea were to use nuclear weapons against South Korea or Japan, the United States might handle the needed nuclear response, but Russia and China would tolerate the United States' doing so, much as they tolerated the Gulf War. This enforced nonuse policy, however, would have to apply not just to nuclear weapons but to any large-scale use of weapons of mass destruction. Sometime in the far distant future, it (nuclear abolition) might happen. But other things would have to happen first. The world would have to come under the control of some global authority, and a rather intrusive and demanding one at that...neither governments nor people will seriously consider taking any really big steps until they are kicked in that direction by very intense emotions.

Opposition To Nuclear Weapons Abolition

Walter B. Slocombe, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, February 12, 1997: There is no reasonable prospect that all the declared and de facto nuclear powers will agree in the near term to give up all their nuclear weapons. And as long as one such state refuses to do so, it will be necessary for us to retain a nuclear force of our own. If the nuclear powers were . . . to accept abolition, then we would require - and the Congress would rightly demand - a verification regime of extraordinary rigor and intrusiveness. This would have to go far beyond any currently in existence or even under contemplation. It would have to include not merely a system of verification, but what the "international generals statement" calls "an agreed procedure for forcible international intervention and interruption of current efforts in a certain and timely fashion.

We who are charged with responsibility for national security and national defense must recall that we are not only seeking to avert nuclear war - we are seeking to avert major conventional war as well. . . During the cold war nuclear weapons played a stabilizing role in that they made the resort to military force less likely. The world is still heavily armed with advanced conventional weapons and will increasingly be so armed with weapons of mass destruction. The existence of nuclear weapons continues to serve as a damper on the resort to the use of force.

Richard Perle, Assistant Secretary for International Security Policy of the Defense Department, 1981-1987, February 12, 1997: There are at least five important reasons why we should reject categorically and unapologetically the argument that the elimination of all nuclear weapons would be a wise goal for the United States. First, there is no way to verify compliance with a treaty banning all nuclear weapons. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not ever. The weapons are too small and the space in which they can be hidden too vast to allow for confident monitoring.

Second, the elimination of our last remaining nuclear weapon, in light of the near certainty that others would cheat and hold some weapons back would be an act of supreme folly.

Third, even if the impossible happened and everyone turned in his last weapon, how long would it be before the continuing technical and scientific know-how and industrial capacity in the former nuclear-weapon states was mobilized to re-establish one or more nuclear powers?

Fourth, the elimination of nuclear weapons, or even a commitment to eliminate them in the future, would be a major encouragement to potential proliferators. . . . These would pose a serious threat to us and to others, to be sure. But the United States possesses many thousands of such weapons and other nuclear weapons states have thousands or hundreds. Surely a state with a handful of nuclear weapons would take seriously the substantial nuclear arsenals of the major nuclear powers.

Fifth, the elimination of all nuclear weapons would end our possession of a deterrent force that has contributed significantly to the peace among nuclear powers that has prevailed since World War II. And while conventional weapons have improved dramatically, and we are less dependent on nuclear weapons than at any time since their invention, they still exert a sobering influence that cannot be achieved by any other means.