Appendix 2

Nuclear deterrence

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It is conventional wisdom in the West that nuclear weapons kept the peace during 40 years of Cold War. It is also widely believed that in adopting a policy of nuclear deterrence, we suffered no harm. Neither claim is supported by the evidence, and the second belief is dangerously wrong.

To dispose of these beliefs we need to understand the genesis and evolution of the underlying theories that had such a profound influence on the nuclear arms race and US policies towards the Soviet Union. With that as background, I outline the damaging effects that deterrence dogma had on western interests and world politics; consider whether those effects were peculiar to the prevailing circumstances or are inherent to the concept; and address the question of ‘stable deterrence’. Lastly, I dismantle the claim that nuclear weapons kept the peace; and review the place of deterrence-based policies in the future.

Background

Nuclear deterrence theory was a purely western construct. To oversimplify: it focused on how to prevent Soviet aggression by threatening to inflict unacceptable punishment on the Soviet homeland, a problem that dominated western strategic theorizing during most of the 1950s. A credible deterrent depended on the certainty of US retribution and, towards the end of that decade, as the Soviets began to acquire the capability to strike directly at the United States, American attention turned to guarding against the danger of a premeditated disarming strike, of the kind attempted by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. The need for invulnerability introduced a new factor into the offence/defence calculus and gave full rein to an extreme form of worst-case analysis.

The emerging Soviet capability also directed attention to a new danger that stemmed from the devastating nature of nuclear weapons. In a major confrontation,

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1 This article was first published in the Report of the Canberra Commission on the elimination of nuclear weapons, August 1996. The only addition to the original text is note 5, which quotes a recent official US assessment of the actual threat posed by the Soviets during the Cold War.
the advantage of getting in the first blow with nuclear weapons was so great that a prudent national leader might be prompted to launch a nuclear strike on the mere suspicion that the other side was contemplating war. This perceived pressure to pre-empt in a crisis introduced a new concern for the ‘stability’ of the emerging strategic balance. The simple requirement that Soviet aggression be deterred came, for some, to be qualified by the somewhat contradictory requirement that Moscow be reassured that the United States would not itself launch a first strike.

The intellectual basis of the US arms control establishment was founded on this recognition of the need for mutual reassurance, but it also accepted the tenets of deterrence theory. Strategic stability was to be achieved by both sides having a ‘second strike’ (or more properly, strike second) capability, which would ensure that enough weapons could survive a first strike to be able to inflict unacceptable damage on the initiator. An assured second strike was, however, only one of the requirements of reassurance doctrine. It also assumed that both sides would avoid weapons systems that might deprive the other of such a capability.

While mutual assurance provided the basis of western arms control theory, US arms control policy was shaped by an amalgam of deterrence and reassurance theories, reflecting the deep divisions in American politics regarding the desirability of arms control rather than US military superiority. These divisions were reflected in two opposing camps: the arms control strategists and the nuclear weapons strategists; while the ideological wings did not communicate, the operational-pragmatists in both camps were able to work together. They were essentially the same as the ‘reassurers’ and the ‘detrainers’, and it was the amalgam of these two viewpoints that formed the basis of US arms control policy through the 1960s and into the mid-1970s. This was to rely on the fact that both the US and the USSR had an assured second strike capability, meaning that a situation of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) existed.

However, as America gradually lost the clear nuclear pre-eminence it had long enjoyed, so did this political centre erode and the two camps draw further apart. The nuclear-weapon strategists became increasingly influential and, within that camp, the ideological wing became increasingly important, insisting that the Soviets would seek to exploit a notional window of vulnerability at some future date. There was growing disenchantment with the idea of basing US security on the threat of mutual suicide and, from 1974, US policies moved steadily away from MAD towards a ‘countervailing strategy’. By the early 1980s, this required the US to be able to fight and win a protracted nuclear war—a policy that continued to be justified in terms of nuclear deterrence, and required the US to have ‘escalation dominance’ at all levels.

Arms control negotiations came to be seen, not as a cooperative endeavour, but a zero-sum contest. By 1981–3, the clear purpose of US negotiations on intermediate nuclear forces and strategic arms reductions was to placate domestic and

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Appendix 2: Nuclear deterrence

allied opinion and to embarrass the Soviets, rather than to reach agreement on reducing the level of armaments.³

Frustrated by these developments, the ideological wing of the arms control camp broke with the pragmatists and proposed a general freeze on nuclear weapons, an idea that proved unexpectedly popular at grass-roots level throughout the US. As a separate development, the Catholic bishops of America had published a pastoral letter which contained major reservations on the morality of nuclear deterrence as the basis of national security and, in the eyes of many, implicitly condemned it. It was against this background that the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) was launched in March 1983, outflanking the Freeze Movement and offering a positive response to the bishops’ moral doubts. MAD was labelled as ‘offense-reliant’ and compared unfavourably to the SDI, which would restore America’s territorial inviolability, exploiting US ingenuity to turn space itself into a defensive shield.

It is unlikely that many within the US defence establishment believed the official line that the SDI would obviate the need for nuclear deterrence, leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons. The most widespread rationale was that the SDI would enhance deterrence by ensuring an effective defence of US ICBM fields, covering against Soviet cheating, albeit at the cost of reassurance. There were many who welcomed the possibility of combining a space-based shield with a full complement of strategic offensive missiles, thereby restoring the military superiority that America enjoyed in the 1950s. And some spoke of the strategic high ground and the possibility of using space-based weapons to threaten the Soviet Union directly. But no one explained why the Soviets would sit idly by as the US set about assembling these systems in space that would have the potential to strike Moscow with pinpoint accuracy at a few seconds’ notice.

Whatever its ultimate role, the SDI would have breached the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty and extended the arms race into space, providing new occasions for conflict in the process. But by fortunate coincidence, the generational change of Soviet leadership brought to power in 1985 a man who had not been involved in the strategic debate and could recognize the fatal absurdity of the existing situation, whatever its theoretical merits. A man who appreciated the need for ‘new political thinking about international relations’ and had the political authority and the courage to break the action–reaction cycle of the nuclear arms race.

This brief outline indicates that nuclear deterrence was never some categorical imperative for foreign policy in the nuclear age. Rather, the policy was just one arena of the long-running Washington debate on how to handle the threat of Soviet communism. Reliance on MAD, the centre-piece of the theory, was under attack by the mid–1970s, culminating in its official rejection by the mid-90s, a volte-face that had no effect on the underlying dogma. This was not surprising. The theoretical ramifications of the underlying dogma had become so tortuous that it could be used to support the opposite sides of the same argument. It could

³ This was made explicit by Secretary of State Alexander Haig and by Richard Burt, Haig’s arms-control deputy. For sources see Michael McGwire, Military objectives on Soviet foreign policy (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1987), p. 265, n. 44.
also be transmuted into simple objectives like ‘preserving peace’ and ‘deterring war’—as unobjectionable as motherhood and apple pie. A combination of its simple and complex forms provided the intellectual and moral authority of a state religion, and the effect was equally stultifying.

**The costs of deterrence dogma**

There were many variations on the theme of nuclear deterrence but they had four features in common which helped to account for the pernicious effects of the central dogma. First was the abstract style of reasoning and axiomatic nature of the underlying theories, which derived from mathematics and economics rather than international politics. This led to a definition of rational behaviour that, in political terms, was at best a-rational and more often irrational, and favoured game-theoretic models like the prisoners’ dilemma over studying the political psychology of opponents and allies.4

Second was the absence of serious Sovietologists from the theoretical debate, even though theories of limited war and escalation depended on assumptions about the Soviet reaction under specified circumstances. The abstract nature of the debate was partly to blame for this omission, but it was mainly because deterrence dogma took Soviet intentions as given. Capabilities alone were of analytical interest, it being asserted that the Soviet Union had a relentless drive for military world domination and felt an urge, above all things, to seize Europe.5 These two aspects of the dogma, when combined with concern for the catastrophic consequences of nuclear surprise, encouraged an extreme form of worst-case analysis in which a course of Soviet action need only be ‘conceivable’ for it to be included in the calculus of threat. Strategic studies and its foreign policy counterpart came to be dominated by ‘tough-minded’ theorists.

A third feature of the dogma was the fundamentally punitive tone of nuclear deterrence. It was not just a passive matter of locking the door and barring the windows to avoid tempting a light-fingered neighbour. It was an active policy which asserted an implacable Soviet Union and threatened wholesale devastation. The policy relied on the capability and the will to inflict such punishment, and a prerequisite for making this posture credible was that the electorate should continue to believe in a high level of Soviet threat.

Fourth, the theory of reassurance that underlay strategic arms control stemmed from the same roots as nuclear deterrence and shared its underlying assumptions about the need to counter a relentless urge to aggression. The concept of reassurance had emerged in response to certain undesirable side-effects of deterrence and,

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5 For example, in 1983–4 we were told (repeatedly) by the US Secretary of Defence that we were faced with the ‘relentless expansion’ of Soviet Communism, which was set on military world domination (CBS TV, *Face the Nation*, 11 March 1983; USA Today, 11 Aug. 1983; Fred Hyatt, *Washington Post*, 11 April 1984. However, in September 2002, we were told (on the president’s authority) that in the Cold War, especially following the Cuban missile crisis, ‘we faced a generally status quo risk-averse adversary’ (*National Security Strategy of the USA*, White House, 15 Sept. 2002, p. 15)
rather than limiting the buildup of nuclear weapons, its concern was a narrowly defined concept of strategic stability.

**Foreign policy**

Deterrence dogma stunted the development of US foreign policy. Because deterrence and its corollary, containment, were the dominant concepts in foreign and defence policy, perceptions of threat remained frozen in the mould of the 1947–53 period. The dogma provided the intellectual casing that made this world view impervious to contradictory evidence and analysis.

Threat assessments were made at the wrong level of analysis. By taking an urge to aggression as given and focusing only on Soviet capabilities, assessments were pitched at the military-tactical or ‘colonel’s’ level. While worst-case analysis of this kind is appropriate to contingency planning, it is wholly inappropriate at the political-strategic or ‘ministerial’ level of analysis that should underlie foreign policy. At this higher level the primary concern is the most likely course of events, taking the opponent’s interests and intentions into account, as well as the balance between his capabilities and his legitimate requirements. To claim that intentions should be ignored because they might change overnight is to fall into the ‘colonel’s fallacy’, ascribing worst-case intentions without doing the analysis. The historical record shows that intentions at the national level are remarkably consistent, and radical change only comes about through major political shifts such as those that followed the Russian Revolution or the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

As with threat analysis, deterrence dogma predisposed the foreign policy specialist to focus on the containment of Soviet power rather than pursuing a higher-order objective that would allow a wider range of policies in support. If the primary objective of foreign policy was containment, that policy would inevitably be negative. A broader objective such as ‘securing cooperative Soviet behaviour’ would have opened up more constructive policy options. At that higher level, containment would continue to be an important supporting objective, but it could be flanked by positive objectives such as increasing trade interdependence, fostering consultation on matters of mutual interest, and even encouraging rising expectations by improving Soviet standards of living.

During the period of detente in the early 1970s, the US did adopt a higher-level objective and this did allow a broader range of initiatives. These brought benefits that extended beyond Soviet–American relations and contributed to the improvement in East–West relations in Europe. But the simplistic assumptions about Soviet intentions that were inherent in the dogma of deterrence were incompatible with those that underlay a policy of detente. The deterrent calculus was manipulated to expose a ‘window of vulnerability’, and was then used to justify a return to more restrictive policies.

Deterrence dogma also came to shape US crisis behaviour. In the early days, there was the pressure to pre-empt, fostered by the core assumption of a mindless Soviet urge to aggression, but at least that danger was recognized. By the 1970s, the
greater danger lay in the US assumption that deterrence could not fail, which was reinforced by the knowledge that the Soviets ‘had the fear of war in their bones’.6 Crises were seen, not as something to be avoided, but as an opportunity to make gains by manipulating risks and escalating threats, with no danger of losing control.7 This notion of ‘conflict management’ encouraged the chief-executive approach to foreign relations and fostered the idea that, given the appropriate mix of strategies, policies could be imposed on others, obviating the need for mutual accommodation.

In sum, deterrence dogma fostered an assertive apolitical style that favoured preventive and punitive instruments, was distrustful of negotiations, and saw compromise as weakness. The possibility that US interests might be served by cooperating with the Soviet Union in dealing with problems around the world was excluded from consideration, and long-term objectives designed to help shape future Soviet policies were simply not addressed.

**Arms control**

Deterrence dogma fuelled the arms race rather than checking it. The deterriors hypothesized a malevolent Soviet Union anxious to exploit any chance to destroy the US, assumed a president easily blackmailed into inactivity, and then considered every possible scenario to assess what was needed. The answer was always ‘more’. And while the ‘credibility’ of deterrence required the capability to launch under attack, ‘stability’ required that the US second strike be able to survive an attack, meaning even larger arsenals. Reassurance theory assumed that both sides would eschew weapons systems that could deprive the other of an assured second strike. In the absence of this self-denying ordinance, reassurance theory became a recipe for arms racing, as each side sought to ensure it could absorb a first strike and then retaliate.8

The reassurers were concerned with relative rather than aggregate levels of weapons and, anyway, large inventories were theoretically more stable than small ones. It was the deterriors who focused on numbers when they saw that the Soviet Union would not only match the US buildup but surpass it. At the end of the 1960s, arms control policy moved to cap the number of missiles, while the deterriors sought to regain their original advantage by multiplying the number of US warheads. As the Soviets moved to catch up in that field too, the deterriors sought relative advantage through added diversity. They redefined the requirements for stability and, by using carefully selected units of account, were able to exploit

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8 Between 1970 and 1975 (at the height of the SALT negotiations), the number of US strategic warheads rose from 1,900 to 6,810; Soviet warheads increased from about 1,700 to 2,700. Similarly, between 1982 and 1990 (the period of the START negotiations) US strategic warheads increased from 11,000 to 13,000, while the number of Soviet warheads rose from about 8,800 to just below 11,000. Even after the Soviet Union had disintegrated, deterrence dogma (articulated in terms of strategic targeting) called for a US arsenal of 4,700 warheads, which would be capable of destroying Russia as a functioning society several times over.
reassurance theory in such a way as to discredit arms control policy and demonstrate an urgent requirement for new offensive systems.

Of course the US side of the arms race was not only, or even mainly, driven by deterrence dogma. But it provided an intellectually respectable rationalization for policies shaped by the electorate’s reluctance to forgo strategic superiority, by the economic argument that a strategic arms race would disadvantage the USSR, and by the multiplier of traditional (if inappropriate) targeting criteria. It also allowed the US to claim moral rectitude in choosing counter-force over counter-value, or the arming of space over mutual assured destruction.

Military policy

Deterrence dogma led to military strategy being replaced by force-exchange ratios, damage expectations, and kill-probabilities, concepts that lent themselves to mathematical permutations. The strategic debate extended to theoretical elaborations of deterrence and reassurance and pondered the rationality of irrationality and the potential for compellance. But these elaborations were applying Cartesian logic to complex problems of political psychology, resulting in bad politics and bad strategy, as the US found out in Vietnam.

In Europe the debate was dominated by questions of deterrence, escalation, firebreaks, coupling and decoupling, all predicated on a Soviet urge to aggression, whereas the Soviet priority was to avoid the catastrophe of world war. Should it prove inescapable, the Soviet objective was ‘not to lose’ and this required that NATO be defeated in Europe and the US be evicted from the continent. NATO’s doctrine of flexible response (1967) was meant to make war less likely by increasing the credibility of deterrence. In practice, it made war just that bit more likely by providing a possible opening (should war seem unavoidable) for a Soviet blitzkreig attack using conventional weapons only. In the 1969–75 period, the Soviets restructured their forces accordingly, to NATO’s surprise and alarm.

Deterrence dogma failed as a strategic theory because it ignored the ‘urge’ component of temptation, focusing solely on ‘opportunity’. The same thing happened in the 1970s, when the military claimed that the credibility of deterrence required the US to develop the capability to fight a protracted nuclear war. And this despite universal acceptance that in the 1970s the temptation for the Soviets to initiate war was much lower than what was believed to exist in the 1950s, when the destruction of some 30 Soviet cities was considered deterrent enough.

But this misuse of deterrence theory was hardly surprising as the nuclear weapons strategists saw the dogma as something to be exploited when it promoted US superiority, but disregarded if a constraint. Thus, a steady stream of new weapons systems and operational deployments were justified on the grounds of their contribution to deterrence. But the complementary requirement to eschew weapons systems that could undermine the opponent’s second strike capability was ignored, as in the case of the attack submarines designed to kill Soviet ballistic missile units.
International relations

Deterrence dogma increased international tension by fuelling the arms race and fostering a paranoid approach to arms control negotiations. Attempts at detente were undermined by the relentless buildup of weapons; obeying the dictates of cognitive dissonance, threat perceptions followed suit. The theoretical approach to ensuring ‘stability’ fostered complacency in crises and concealed the danger that lay in the dynamic of events over which there could be no control. Focusing exclusively on the possibility of Soviet aggression, the dogma obscured the reality that war itself was the greater danger, and that measures to enhance deterrence often made war more likely.

Its most corrosive effect was on the style of international relations. The will to inflict punishment was as important as the capability to do so and, even when America enjoyed an atomic monopoly, its people had to see the Soviets as an enemy deserving nuclear incineration. The dogma encouraged exaggerated, moralistic rhetoric directed at domestic constituencies as well as opponents, and it was easier to inflame hostility than assuage it. Add the need to make the threat credible and it was inevitable that policies based on deterrence would favour intransigence and discourage serious negotiations and the search for compromise.

From the very start, the question of how to handle atomic weapons became entangled with the question of how to handle the Soviets. By claiming to have solved the problems of nuclear weapons, deterrence dogma dissipated the sudden urgency that this awesome new capability had brought to the postwar search for ways of managing interstate relations. Threatening a greater evil than it sought to prevent, deterrence dogma echoed the communist line that ends justify means. The ‘means’ were the military capability and political will to devastate the Soviet Union. And, as nuclear arsenals grew, so did this explicit threat to the Soviet Union evolve into an implicit threat to the survival of the human race. Deterrence dogma made it ‘moral’ to put the world at risk, as the West pursued the chimera of total security.

Were the costs due to special circumstances?

By 1960, the lineaments of deterrence theory were clearly defined, and it is fair to ask whether the effects of the dogma were a result of the unique circumstances surrounding its inception.

The answer is no, because the dogma was developed largely independent of those circumstances. The basic idea of using nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union grew out of the US atomic monopoly and the culture of strategic bombing. In 1948, the recently retired chief of the US Air Staff spoke of destroying a few hundred square miles of Soviet industrial capacity, and the talk at that period was of preventive war, rather than deterrence; by 1953/54 atomic weapons had been

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Appendix 2: Nuclear deterrence

integrated into NATO’s plans for the defence of western Europe. It was not until the US was threatened by the emerging Soviet capability that a fully developed theory of nuclear deterrence began to be elaborated. This theorizing was sparked by the new vulnerability and was not a product of the postwar circumstances.

It might be said that the post-war emergence of the Soviet Union as the leader of a competing socio-economic system as well as a potential superpower explains the punitive nature of deterrence dogma. Perhaps, but that does not rule out a comparable competition in the future.

And while it is true that NATO, ‘the keeper of the threat’, contributed to the unexamined assumption of a Soviet urge to aggression, the reality of that urge was never an issue for the deterrent theorists. The mere possibility of aggression qualified it as a core assumption and required the formulation of appropriate responses. So we are left with the conclusion that the costs of nuclear deterrence are inherent in the dogma.

We can also conclude that the world was fortunate that America’s opponent was the Soviet Union and not a mirror image of the US. Unlike NATO, Moscow did re-evaluate the threat. By 1959 it had decided that the danger was no longer a deliberate attack by a US-led capitalist coalition (seen as a live possibility for the previous ten years), but inadvertent war. By definition, inadvertent war could not be deterred, but it might be avoided, given the right mix of policies. The world was also lucky that there were only two real players in that game of nuclear poker. In a multi-polar world, the possibility of mishaps would increase exponentially.

Is stable deterrence possible?

By the late 1950s, the fundamental instability of nuclear deterrence had been recognized by theorists. It was then demonstrated by the strategic arms competition that continued long after both sides had the capacity to destroy each other several times over (MAD). Initially, it was thought to be a theoretical problem with technical solutions, but it became clear that instability was a function of psychological and political factors, which were exacerbated by asymmetries in the nature and timing of weapons programmes.

For example, the ‘window of opportunity’ scare in the 1970s rested on the argument that at some future date, the Soviets would be able to launch a disarming strike against US land-based systems, and that the president would then be deterred from responding with US sea-based systems by the Soviet threat to US population centres. Rejecting any consideration of Soviet national interests, it was asserted that Moscow might attempt such a disarming strike if it thought it had a five per cent chance of success. At this same period, there was the quite different argument that deterrence now required a US capability to wage sustained nuclear war. Both arguments led to new weapons programmes.

US crisis behaviour in the first half of the 1970s, which appears to have relied on the situation of mutual assured destruction then existing, might seem to contradict the conclusion that nuclear deterrence was inherently unstable. But a variant
of MAD had also existed at the time of the Cuban missile crisis (albeit in a form that greatly favoured the US) when the fragility of crisis stability was clear for all to see.\textsuperscript{10} A crucial difference between Cuba and October 1973 was the reality of detente, and this supports the contention that stability depends primarily on political and psychological factors.\textsuperscript{11}

As a general principle, the strategy of deterrence was a primary cause of crisis instability, whether it stemmed from the doctrinal need to demonstrate resolve, or from the use of pre-programmed (and sometimes automated) decisions. The strategy served as catalyst for very accurate missiles capable of destroying the opponent’s command and control, should war seem unavoidable. It encouraged both sides to adopt a high state of alert early in a serious crisis to discourage adversarial pre-emption, thereby increasing the risk of accidental war.\textsuperscript{12}

**Did nuclear weapons keep the peace?**

Given the political and social costs of nuclear deterrence, the onus of proof lies with those who claim that nuclear weapons have kept the peace since the Second World War. We know that such weapons did not prevent the Korean War or Vietnam. Nor did they deter the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979, all part of the Soviet national security zone. We are left, then, with the narrow claim that, in the absence of nuclear deterrence, the Soviets would have invaded NATO Europe, precipitating Third World War.

To validate that claim, it must be shown that (1) the Soviets had both the urge and the capability for military aggression in Europe, and (2) they would not have been deterred from such action by the prospect of conventional war. This second point is inherently implausible. Are we to suppose that the prize of a ravaged Europe would have been worth that cost, given the devastation of Russia and its people in the Second World War?\textsuperscript{13} And what of the effect that such a war would have on other Soviet objectives, such as restoring the power and prosperity of the homeland, improving Soviet standing in the competition for world influence, and promoting the international communist movement?

Nor is the first point any easier to demonstrate. If the Soviet Union had this urge to territorial expansion, why did it withdraw its forces from so many strategic areas in the wake of the Second World War?\textsuperscript{14} Second, where was the incentive

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\textsuperscript{10} In 1973, the US was targeted by about 1,000 Soviet ICBMs; in 1962 by perhaps 30.

\textsuperscript{11} Henry Kissinger's brinkmanship in October 1973 was an attempt at compellence, not deterrence. The course of events saved him from having to back down from an implausible threat.


\textsuperscript{13} Our mistake was to equate Stalin's Russia with Hitler's Germany. The correct analogy was Britain and France after the First World War. Victors, but at such a heavy cost that they went to extreme lengths to avoid another war.

\textsuperscript{14} E.g. forces that, in the process of driving back the Germans, had advanced about 250 miles into Norway. Why did the Soviet Union withdraw from Finland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the strategically located island of Bornholm in the Baltic? Why agree to four-power control over Berlin, a city captured by the Soviets and well behind their lines? And why, in 1944, did the Soviet Union insist that the Bulgarians withdraw their army from Thrace and the Aegean coast, and refuse help to the communist insurgency in Greece that was positioned to seize power?
Appendix 2: Nuclear deterrence

for the Soviet Union to go to war? In the course of evicting the Axis invaders, it had regained the territories it lost in 1918–21 and restored the old imperial boundaries. In 1947–8, when Moscow came to perceive the more immediate threat of a capitalist-initiated war within five years, the de facto front line was 500 miles west of Soviet territory and ran across the narrowest part of the continent, making it easier to turn Eastern Europe into a military and ideological glacis. Third, where was the Soviet capability to go to war? In 1946–7, the time when US threat assessments swung to portraying Soviet communism as set on military world domination, the Soviet Union could barely feed its people and had adopted the expedient of removing the second track of German railways to help restore the rail system in Russia.

These historical facts are sufficient to cast doubts on the western portrayal of Soviet capabilities and intentions in 1947–53, the period when mutual perceptions of threat crystallized into East–West confrontation. Such ‘worst case’ assumptions may have been justified as the basis for the military contingency planning that shaped western policies in Europe at that time. But those same assumptions cannot now be promoted to ‘truths’ and used to argue that having kept the peace in the past, nuclear weapons must be retained for that purpose in the future.

Working towards an NWF world: what role for deterrence?

The argument of this paper disagrees with the western belief that nuclear deterrence kept the peace or (at worst) was a cost-free hedge against the possibility of Soviet aggression. My conclusions are, however, supported by a large body of academic analysis of nuclear deterrence as a strategy. For example, Lebow and Stein note that ‘the history of the Cold War provides compelling evidence of the pernicious effects of the open-ended quest for nuclear deterrence.’ This is one conclusion of their 1994 book (375 pages of empirical analysis backed by 250 pages of interview and source notes), but well-founded criticism of the theory of nuclear deterrence goes back to the late 1950s. Despite a sustained public education programme on the virtues of nuclear deterrence and the merits of the ever-growing arsenals, cogent criticism from across the academic disciplines never fell silent.

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15 The Allies had agreed to Poland’s physical displacement westwards, aligning the Polish–Soviet border with the 1919 Curzon line. The priority of Soviet interests in Poland and the Balkans had been acknowledged by the Allied leaders. As the course of war brought Soviet troops into Eastern Europe, Stalin was in a position to establish a buffer of amenable states between the USSR and the resurgent Germany that was expected to emerge in 15–20 years’ time.


17 Lebow and Stein, We all lost the Cold War, p. 367.

During the 1980s, following the collapse of detente, the fragmentation of nuclear doctrine, and the US adoption of a deliberately confrontational policy towards the Soviet Union, the volume of criticism increased sharply, drawing on the evidence of the previous 20–30 years. Analyses moved on from the details of nuclear policy to the role of deterrence as an organizing principle for defence and foreign policy, drawing on psychological findings as well as empirical political analysis. In a collection along these lines, focusing on conventional rather than nuclear deterrence, there was general criticism of the assumptions underlying theories of deterrence, particularly those concerning information and communication, definitions of rationality, and questions of motivation. The general opinion was that the western strategy of deterrence was based on a deficient model of interaction: analytically weak, politically crude, and normatively biased.19

A common theme running through most of the analyses is the lop-sided nature of any deterrence-based strategy, with its emphasis on a single instrument of policy, namely punishment. This bias invariably reinforces and sometimes generates an enemy stereotype—an inherent bad-faith model that is immune to evidence that contradicts preconceived motivational assumptions. These effects increase exponentially when one moves from conventional to nuclear deterrence. It is with this criticism particularly in mind that I turn to consider whether deterrence will have a role to play, should the nuclear-weapons states adopt the policy-goal of a nuclear-weapons-free world and commit themselves to clearly defined procedures for achieving that goal.

In common parlance, to be deterred from doing something is to say that the potential costs are too high, be it the difficulty of a rock face, the price of certain goods, the level of military defences, or the penalty for breaking the law. In western parlance, the emphasis has shifted from the passive to the active mode, and the concept has been personalized. While political scientists may talk of challenger and defender, themselves loaded terms, for policy-makers and public the image conjured up by ‘deterrence’ is that of the magistrate and the law breaker, the latter only held in check by the threat of capital punishment.

It is in this western sense that the concept of deterrence is wholly inappropriate to the process whereby the nuclear-weapons states progressively divest themselves of their arsenals. If it is to succeed, it will have to be a collaborative effort, involving concepts like collective and cooperative security. A basic assumption will be that all parties to the process share the common goal, and while there may be disagreements on how to get there, they will be resolved through negotiations involving the full range of political and economic trade-offs and not by threats of punishment.

The project will surely fail if nuclear deterrence enters the picture, as it is inherently divisive. We will, therefore, have to eschew using the concept to reassure domestic constituencies, who will need to be convinced that verification

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is truly effective, and re-educated to accept that existing balances of weapons and advantage will not be changed by the phased reductions.

Nor is the western concept of nuclear deterrence relevant to the final stage, when the US, Russia and China get rid of their remaining weapons. The appropriate analogy is that of three gun-fighters, who have agreed to get rid of their weapons but are concerned to avoid getting shot in the process. We would like to have a well-armed, neutral sheriff to deter any attempt to cheat. But that is neither possible nor necessary. In common parlance, all three states will be deterred from attacking the other two, because the possible benefits could not match the certain costs, let alone the probable ones.

To conclude

In theory, the argument for eliminating nuclear weapons should be strengthened by the evidence that deterrence dogma did not prevent war, but actually made it more likely. In practice, the link between nuclear deterrence and peace is now so deeply embedded in western minds that the goal of an NWF world may depend as much on re-educating the electorates as on eliminating the weapons.

Re-education does not mean ascribing blame. People of great intelligence and good will were involved in the development of what ultimately became the dogma of deterrence. Their hindsight was limited to the 1930s and 1940s. Their assessment of Soviet intentions was shaped by the Greek civil war, the Prague coup, the Berlin blockade, the communist victory in China, and the Korean war. Viewing the situation through the lens of Munich, they believed that a Third World War would come about through Soviet aggression and they were determined not to repeat the mistakes of the 1930s.

They were unusually perspicacious in appreciating that nuclear weapons were qualitatively different from any that had been used before. In developing the concept of nuclear deterrence, they believed they had solved the problem of how to contain both the threat of Soviet communism and the dangers inherent in this awesome new capability.

The electorate and their leaders were only too willing to accept these claims, and the concept acted as an intellectual tranquillizer, its increasingly sophisticated logic imparting a sense of false certainty and inhibiting attempts to challenge its underlying assumptions. The emerging dogma imposed a rigid framework on western thinking and prevented our view of the world from evolving along with new information and more relevant hindsight.

The judgements reached on the limited evidence available in the early years of the Cold War are understandable, but we now have 50 years of hindsight. And there already exists a substantial body of cross-disciplinary research that challenges the claims made for the strategy of nuclear deterrence and for the assumptions that underlie it, on both empirical and theoretical grounds. It is now clear that the dogma, as it developed, was intellectually and morally flawed.
It will not be easy to overturn the conventional wisdom. That the British Trident programme can be justified by a need ‘to deter’, without specifying who is to be deterred from doing what, indicates the honorific status of the concept. But with the superpower confrontation behind us, the time has surely come for western leaders to recognize (if not yet acknowledge) that the great achievement of the last 50 years was to have avoided war, despite the corrosive effect of deterrence doctrine on all aspects of East–West relations.