The Stanley Foundation

policy dialogue brief

Critical thinking from Stanley Foundation Conferences

Strategic Deterrence and US Nuclear Weapons Policy Workshop

US Nuclear Policy Review Project

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Strategic Deterrence and US Nuclear Weapons Policy

Recommendations

- Many participants were convinced that the United States has paid a high price for not being more supportive of nuclear disarmament. They said the United States would probably get more international cooperation in holding aiders and abettors accountable—for example, from the UN Security Council—if we made it clear that we are not undermining our commitment to that goal. They also agreed that there is an inherent contradiction in trying to delegitimize nuclear weapons among the Muslim public and, for nonproliferation purposes, making new nuclear threats to deter attacks.

- It is important to distinguish deterrence from compellance, which is more difficult to achieve; otherwise, we will place unrealistic expectations on deterrence. Compellance is intended to convince a state *to do something*, while deterrence usually tries to prevent a state *from doing something* by spelling out potential consequences. The United States is trying to *compel* Iran and North Korea to dismantle their nuclear programs. This is difficult, and its success or failure says nothing about their undeterrability if they refuse to halt their nuclear programs.

- Deterrence should not always focus on the worst-case scenario. During the Cold War, the United States was obsessed with preventing a bolt-from-the-blue attack. (As one conference participant put it, "The litmus test was always, What if the Soviets attack when everyone is snowed in in Washington, DC, and watching the Redskins game?") But assuming the worst case can often be counterproductive. For example, focusing on the worst-case scenario in which Saddam Hussein developed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) caused us to minimize the considerable expenses of disarming him.

- Deterrence cannot be reduced to "the art of threatening." Rather, it involves conveying reassurance at the same time as we convey a countervailing threat. Cold War deterrence was not all about brinksmanship. The Cuban missile crisis was resolved by a trade, not by an "eyeball to eyeball" test of wills. It was less about threat and more about diplomacy, reassurance, and recognizing what the adversary valued.

- Deterrence is not about matching what one's opponent possesses. It made no sense, for example, for the United States to match the Soviet land-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) arsenal when it had offsetting advantages. In modern times, this means asking whether we actually require nuclear weapons to deter, say, Iran.

- Deterrence is not a substitute for diplomacy. The 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea was better for US interests than the alternative: having no agreement and relying on deterrence alone to prevent an attack.

- Deterrence often leads to overcommitment. Once a leader takes a stand, it becomes very difficult to retreat, as the United States experienced in Vietnam and Iraq.

- Deterrence is inevitable. Even if the United States launched a preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure, Iran would retain some residual capability. We would set back its program, but not terminate it. So in the end, we would still face the task of deterring the regime or compelling it not to reconstitute its program. We face a similar situation with North Korea.

Strategic deterrence, as a concept evidenced by the absence of physical aggression, is inherently difficult to define, much less prove. Faced with the challenge of proving a negative for most of the past sixty years, deterrence strategists have turned to theoretical constructs to map out conceptions of deterrence and weighed various theories against each other. However, these traditional notions of nuclear deterrence have been challenged by the end of the Cold War, the attacks of 9/11 and Al Qaeda's stated desire to build an atomic bomb, and the nuclear programs of so-called "rogue" states such as Iran and North Korea. While none of these new circumstances has yet resulted in a nuclear attack against the United States or any other target, strategic theorists have been forced to reevaluate and recalibrate their theoretical models to take this new data into account and have been left wondering about the stability of their lines of argumentation.

The Bush administration has said that, in response, it has altered its conception of deterrence, but it is unclear whether it has developed a genuinely new model for deterrence and whether its actions have, in fact, increased its ability to dissuade enemies from attacking the United States. Moreover, questions persist over whether conventional deterrence is effective against states such as Iran or terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, whether new conceptions and formulations of deterrence are necessary, or whether some actors are simply "undeterrable." On July 8, 2008, a group of foreign policy scholars and experts met to discuss these issues.

The Bush Administration's Approach to Deterrence

The Bush administration has long argued that the Cold War conception of nuclear deterrence—in which the threat of retaliation causing unacceptable damage produced a state of mutually assured destruction (MAD) between the United States and the Soviet Union—no longer applies. For example, the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) claimed that deterrence had prevented nuclear conflict during the Cold War because the Soviet Union was a "status quo, risk-averse adversary." However, the document continued, "deterrence based only upon the threat of retaliation is less likely to work against leaders of rogue states more willing to take risks, gambling with the lives of their people, and the wealth of their nations." The NSS said that deterrence vis-à-vis rogue states was made more troublesome by their possession of ballistic missiles and WMD and the possibility that they might transfer such weapons to terrorists.

Based on these *a priori* assumptions, to respond to the rise of such undeterrable adversaries, the 2002 NSS declared that the United States had to deploy missile defenses and that it might need to resort to preventive military action. Later that year the Bush administration withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty so that it could legally deploy extensive missile defenses. In 2003 it invaded Iraq, saying that it needed to prevent Saddam Hussein from reconstituting his nuclear weapons program. In its 2001 Nuclear Posture Review, the Bush administration argued that the United States should bring its own nuclear posture into line with this modern understanding of deterrence, emphasizing a more flexible "capabilities-based model" that could respond to a range of adversaries, rather than a "threat-based model" geared toward specific enemies. Central to this updated US nuclear posture would be a "New Triad" consisting of active and passive defenses, mixed nuclear and conventional offensive strike capabilities, and a scalable nuclear complex. The Bush administration subsequently requested funds to explore new low-yield and earth-penetrating nuclear weapons.

However, according to one conference participant, the Bush administration has taken another look at deterrence in the wake of the Iraq war, which has demonstrated that the costs of preventive strikes are far too high to constitute a regular instrument of American foreign policy. Even as North Korea pursued a nuclear weapons program

and Iran continued to enrich uranium, the administration released a number of statements reflecting a search for ways that rogue states, near-peer competitors, and even terrorist networks might be prevented from attacking US interests via what the administration calls *tailored deterrence*—that is, the use of specific messages, force structures, and targeting policies to deter particular adversaries in particular circumstances.

This term figures most prominently in the Pentagon's 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which calls for "tailored deterrence, including prompt global strike capabilities to defend and respond in an overwhelming manner against WMD attacks, and air and missile defenses, as well as other defensive measures, to deter attacks by demonstrating the ability to deny an adversary's objectives." While still maintaining that US adversaries "may not respond to traditional tools and concepts of deterrence," the QDR explains that the Department of Defense is engaged in a:

> ...shift from a one-size-fits-all notion of deterrence toward more tailorable approaches appropriate for advanced military competitors, regional WMD states, and non-state terrorist networks. The future force will provide a fully-balanced, tailored capability to deter both state and non-state threats—including WMD employment, terrorist attacks in the physical and information domains, and opportunistic aggression—while assuring allies and dissuading potential competitors.

The Pentagon refined the idea of tailored deterrence in the December 2006 Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept (DO JOC), which declares that "[t]he techniques of deterrence are not obsolete." The DO JOC defines deterrence as follows:

> Deterrence operations convince adversaries not to take actions that threaten US vital interests by means of decisive influence over their decision making. Decisive influence is achieved by credibly threatening to deny benefits and/or impose costs, while encouraging restraint by convincing the actor that restraint will result in an acceptable outcome.

The document breaks deterrence into two challenges: first, understanding the factors that influence the decision making of US adversaries; and second, integrating "elements of national power" to deny benefits and impose costs. The DO JOC notes that "[d]eterrence is ultimately in the eye of the beholder" and, therefore, that the "[a]dversaries' perceptions are the focus of all our deterrence efforts." It notes that affecting perceptions requires more than simply having and using military capabilities. It also requires efforts of a diplomatic, intelligence, economic, and even law enforcement nature. Ideally, a tailored deterrent would be layered, exercising deterrence at several leverage points along an adversary's decision-making process—for example, on the leader of a country, on that country's society, and on its allies. It would integrate the latest human intelligence with other types of situational awareness to render US policy as responsive as possible to any set of circumstances.

More recently, the Bush administration has tried to deter WMD use against the United States by saying that it would punish attackers and those who helped them. On February 8, 2008, national security adviser Stephen Hadley declared that the United States "will hold any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor or individual fully accountable for supporting or enabling terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction, whether by facilitating, financing, or providing expertise or safe haven for such efforts." Though Hadley said the actual perpetrator of an attack could face US retaliation with *overwhelming force*—a term that could indicate the use of nuclear weapons—he did not specify what would happen to accomplices in such an attack. The State Department subsequently informed a reporter that the United States would "take all factors into account in developing an appropriate response" to a WMD attack, which might include "diplomatic efforts, seizures of funds, military actions, or the use of overwhelming force."

Critiques of the Bush Administration's Approach to Deterrence

One conference participant noted that, *contra* the history laid out in the NSS, American policymakers did not, in fact, consider the Soviet Union a "status quo, risk-averse adversary" and would have rejected the Bush administration's caricature of the Cold War as stable and predictable. The participant noted that those who lived through the Cold War remember "basically having the same discussions as we are today" about Iran—about whether the Soviets were deterrable, whether they were rational, and whether we could understand their motives between the 1950s and the 1980s. National Intelligence Estimates throughout the

Cold War portrayed the USSR as a revolutionary power intent on developing nuclear superiority rather than accepting MAD even as Mikhail Gorbachev adopted a less confrontational foreign policy. Policymakers were unsure what motivated the Soviets. Many thought they had a morality that might make them more willing to risk death in the service of ideology. In essence, they worried that the Soviet Union was an undeterrable rogue state.

Another participant noted that the idea of tailoring deterrence to the psychology of US adversaries was not new. During the Cold War, numerous studies examined what the Soviets valued and tried to identify pressure points that would increase the deterrent effect of US nuclear policy. For example, they considered targeting ethnic Russian areas rather than territory populated by minorities because it was thought that the Russian leadership would value their own kind more. In the end, however, most of these studies were deemed fruitless, and the United States relied on the broad threat that mass destruction posed to regime survival.

One conference participant noted that the Bush administration's approach to deterrence does lack the quantitative emphasis that systems analysts placed on the US-Soviet strategic balance during the Cold War and which they used to calculate "windows of vulnerability." However, a more subjective approach is also more challenging. It is difficult, if not impossible, for American policymakers to understand what is going on in the mind of a leader thousands of miles away; moreover, coordinating different elements of national power across US agencies is easier said than done. Conference participants also commented that the DO JOC is highly conceptual, leaving many of the details of deterrence—such as who is to be deterred, what they are to be deterred from doing, and how to deter them—to other studies. Critics quipped that at this level of generality, *tailored deterrence* could just as easily be called *foreign policy* or *national security*.

This shift in focus from force levels to psychology is partly a function of disparity between the US arsenal and those of its potential enemies. There is no question that the United States can destroy almost any target set it wishes—save perhaps a target in Russia. The United States is not concerned about having enough warheads to survive a first-strike and retaliate; indeed, its overwhelming conventional power alone might provide a satisfactory deterrent in many situations. Discussions about deterring a country like Syria automatically turn from calculating the "balance of forces" to evaluating an adversary's intentions and interests. Moreover, the United States is now dealing with multiple adversaries instead of a single main enemy, causing an increase in uncertainty and obligating military planners to attempt to retrofit Cold War deterrent strategy to apply to different 21st-century contingencies.

One participant wanted to unpack the assumption that deterrence is nuclear. The DO JOC—like the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review—blurs the lines between conventional and nuclear deterrence. It does not elucidate which threats are conventional and which are nuclear, nor does it explain the role of US nuclear weapons in deterring or countering these threats. Aside from a reference to Global Strike and a few other weapons systems, the DO JOC does not satisfactorily spell out the connection between force structure and deterrence.

One participant suggested that the notion of tailored deterrence is actually about tailoring attack options, not deterrence. From a strategic planning standpoint, tailored deterrence dovetails with the Bush administration's earlier planned shift from a "threat-based approach" to a "capabilities-based approach" to the US arsenal. US Strategic Command now maintains a broad family of strike plans, covering a range of targets in a number of adversary countries that have WMD, conventional, and cyber-attack capabilities—in effect producing a multifaceted menu of responses for a vast number of contingencies. As such, tailored deterrence may be less a theoretical innovation than an intellectual justification for the plethora of weapons systems sought by the administration. (Another participant noted that this might be the case with the QDR but is not true of the DO JOC. The two documents may be defending different sets of bureaucratic interests.)

Conference participants were divided over the value of the Bush administration's declaratory stance concerning aiders and abettors of an attack on the United States. Some found it a valuable statement that was, according to one person, "clearer, sharper, and more pronounced" than previous declarations. The declaration "provides a chance to move further down the deterrent path," this person said. Another participant suggested that the United States could make Hadley's threat more credible by:

- Improving our nuclear forensics capability to the point where we can reliably track fissile material to its source.

- Working with other countries that would help us respond to an attack.

- Passing a UN resolution that compels all states and the international community to hold aiders and abettors of nuclear terrorism accountable.

- Planning for contingencies.

- Consulting with key countries, not just our allies, about how we would respond.

Others objected to Hadley's statement, worrying that it might contradict previous US security assurances and that it renews the salience of nuclear weapons at a time when the United States wishes to do the opposite. They also said that the declaration was so sweeping—covering everything from direct involvement in a terrorist nuclear attack on US soil to terrorist financing—that it might weaken deterrence by failing to threaten specific consequences for specific actions.

At the same time, participants were not sure how to make threats more specific. Although it makes sense to hold Iran accountable if the Revolutionary Guard delivered nuclear material to a terrorist group for use against Tel Aviv or New York, what happens if the fissile material has been diverted from a Russian reactor? The United States could not retaliate against Russia with nuclear weapons because that would simply provoke a more devastating counterattack. Or how does one retaliate against illicit diversions? Any number of situations could produce similar quandaries. One participant said that the way to deal with this problem is to create a matrix, then game out possible scenarios. (Deterrence as a solution to the "loose nukes" situation is one attempt to compensate for the global community's failure to achieve accountability for nuclear material and for the shortcomings of measures such as the Cooperative Threat Reduction programs between the United States and Russia and the proposed Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty.)

Can We Deter Rogues?

One participant suggested that the Bush administration's skepticism of deterrence can be traced to its conflation of the motives of states and terrorists. The 2002 NSS, for example, talks about terrorists seeking martyrdom, saying, "We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries. Rogue states and terrorists do not seek to attack us using conventional means. They know such attacks would fail. Instead, they rely on acts of terror and, potentially, the use of weapons of mass destruction."

Other participants traced the belief in "undeterrability" to the very term *rogue state*. One described it as a "rhetorical virus" that infects politicians and editorial writers, functioning as useful shorthand but falsely suggesting that rogue states are homogeneous and implying that they are inherently undeterrable, when they may not be.

Indeed, the term was coined during the Clinton administration, when Defense Secretary Les Aspin was soliciting opinions about the post-Cold War utility of nuclear weapons. One response broached the idea of an intrinsically bad state—one whose mores were so fundamentally incompatible with the Western order that it could not be deterred. Key to this concept of a rogue state was the threat they posed via ballistic missiles and WMD.

The 2002 NSS, in contrast, defines rogue states as nations that:

- Brutalize their own people and squander their national resources for the personal gain of the rulers.

- Display no regard for international law, threaten their neighbors, and callously violate international treaties to which they are party.

- Are determined to acquire WMD, along with other advanced military technology, to be used as threats or offensively to achieve the aggressive designs of these regimes.

- Sponsor terrorism around the globe.

- Reject basic human values and hate the United States and everything for which it stands.

One participant pointed out that however it may be abused, the concept of a rogue state does have some utility. Common sense suggests that a state that assassinates parliamentarians from a neighboring state or talks openly about eliminating its enemies is willing to take more risks than the average state—and is worth worrying about.

The idea that certain states cannot be deterred acquired currency because of Saddam Hussein's actions before the Persian Gulf War. Many policymakers assumed that with a massive coalition arrayed against him, Saddam would withdraw from Kuwait, and they were taken aback when he did not. At the same time, Saddam did not use chemical or biological weapons during the Gulf War, suggesting that he thought doing so could be catastrophic to his regime and that he was somewhat deterred.

Conference participants noted that the historical memory of the 1938 Munich Conference looms over US debates about deterrence. As the recent debate about "appeasement" attests, Americans believe the Europeans should have fought Hitler, an aggressive enemy with messianic goals, far earlier than they did. Those who argue that rogue states are undeterrable tend to model their beliefs about rogue state intentions on this example, thinking that deterrence of an enemy, which implies coexistence, equals appeasement.

Is there such thing as a true rogue state that cannot be deterred? Most conference participants were skeptical whether we could ever know, since we can never know exactly what motivates our adversaries. And, as one pointed out, the short-term logic of deterrence is compelling enough that long-term questions about whether a country believes in coexistence are often moot. Thus, a rogue state could probably be deterred regardless of its ideological proclivities because even rogues believe in self-preservation.

One participant wondered whether a state must be totally undeterrable for deterrence to fail. For example, if a regime were on the cusp of losing power, it might feel it had nothing to lose from using its WMD. However, another participant countered that doing so would require a rogue state dictator to accept that all hope was lost. Saddam Hussein, for one, seemed to believe he was winning until the very end of his regime. Another mentioned that Colin S. Grey, coauthor of the famous 1980 *Foreign Policy* article "Victory Is Possible," and others had warned that the Soviet communists might attack nearby countries rather than give up power if the regime were failing, but that is not what happened.

Can We Deter Terrorists?

Discussing the role of nuclear weapons in preventing terrorism, one participant emphasized that we should talk about "influencing" rather than "deterring," because influencing constitutes a broader range of actions than simply threatening retaliation. While prevention will always be the main instrument of defense against terrorists, we can attempt to alter their calculus and affect their actions, assuming they are rational enough to weigh costs and benefits.

One participant argued that to do this, we must first disaggregate "the terrorists" into their constituent components. For Al Qaeda, constituents might include the core leadership, affiliated jihadist groups, and jihadist cells inspired by Al Qaeda and their supporters. Second, we must find out which leverage points are most effective. This might involve asking: Is using nuclear weapons acceptable to the terrorist group's value system? Do they think using nuclear weapons would be smart? Do they think using nuclear weapons is feasible? Do they think nuclear weapons are a good use of resources? Would it be better for them to continue with their core competency, using conventional weapons? Finally, we would need to determine the optimal mix of hard and soft power to apply at each point.

This participant admitted that it would probably be difficult to dissuade Al Qaeda's core leaders from using nuclear weapons since they seem to believe that acquiring nuclear weapons is consonant with the Quran. (One conference participant objected to this view, saying that some believe bin Laden sees nuclear weapons primarily as a deterrent, and that sometimes he describes nuclear weapons as if he wants to use them to exert leverage—like a nuclear-armed state. Technically, however, Osama bin Laden's nuclear weapons capability would degrade fast enough that he would have a major incentive to "use it or lose it.") Moreover, we probably cannot threaten nuclear retaliation against Al Qaeda's core leadership, nor can we threaten to capture bin Laden, since we don't know where he is. "Flooding the zone" with Special Forces in Waziristan is theoretically a good option, but it would require 200,000 troops that are not available.

Nevertheless, we can seek to influence the Al Qaeda leadership's perceptions of whether nuclear use would serve its goals. For example, Al Qaeda is probably asking if nuclear use would shatter American resolve. One factor that could influence their assessment is whether we come to a satisfactory solution in Iraq. If we leave having created a stable Iraq, and a battered Al Qaeda, it may send a signal. If we withdraw and Iraq experiences an

upsurge in violence—becoming a haven for Al Qaeda—the signal will be different.

We can also affect Al Qaeda's cost-benefit calculations by intensifying our denial activities to make it less likely that a nuclear attack would succeed. For example, we could construct bomb shelters, which would protect populations near a nuclear blast zone from radiation and fallout effects.

We can also heighten Al Qaeda's concern that nuclear use would backfire and alienate the wider Muslim population, which Al Qaeda is attempting to lead and would like to incorporate into its revived caliphate. There is some evidence suggesting this might work. In 2005 Al Qaeda issued a fatwa explicitly rebutting arguments that WMD use is not consistent with the Quran, meaning that it is actually somewhat concerned about Muslim opinion. Of course, polls indicate that most Muslims do not support killing innocent civilians and Americans, yet Al Qaeda continues to do so anyway. Still, it might be worth trying to spark an intra-Islamic debate on nuclear weapons, similar to the debate over nuclear weapons that Catholic bishops had during the Cold War.

Another important pressure point is potential aiders and abettors of nuclear terrorism—individuals, states, and nonstate actors, such as criminal organizations, companies, and the like—who could provide the technical expertise that might make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful nuclear attack. (Members of Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese terrorist group, drove around Tokyo for hours spraying aerosolized anthrax. The attack failed, however, because no expert told them they were using the vaccine version of the disease.) So the Bush administration's new policy—which says that the United States will hold nonstate actors, criminals, and states that support nuclear terrorism accountable—may be valuable. Nevertheless, any deterrent benefit derived from this type of threat needs to be balanced against concerns about nonproliferation and credibility.

Many participants were convinced that the United States has paid a high price for not being more supportive of nuclear disarmament. They said we would probably enlist more international cooperation in holding aiders and abettors accountable—for example, from the UN Security Council—if we made it clear that we are not undermining our commitment to that goal. They also agreed that there is an inherent contradiction in trying to delegitimize nuclear weapons among the Muslim public and, for nonproliferation purposes, making new nuclear threats to deter attacks.

Thoughts on Deterrence

Conference participants made a number of observations about the nature of deterrence:

- It is important to distinguish deterrence from compellance, which is more difficult to achieve; otherwise, we will place unrealistic expectations on deterrence. Compellance is intended to convince a state *to do something*, whereas deterrence usually tries to prevent a state *from doing something* by spelling out potential consequences. The United States is trying to *compel* Iran and North Korea to dismantle their nuclear programs. This is difficult, and its success or failure says nothing about their undeterrability if they refuse to halt their nuclear programs.

- Deterrence should not always focus on the worst-case scenario. During the Cold War, the United States was obsessed with preventing a bolt-from-the-blue attack. (As one conference participant put it, "The litmus test was always, What if the Soviets attack when everyone is snowed in in Washington, DC, and watching the Redskins game?") But assuming the worst case can often be counterproductive. For example, focusing on the worst-case scenario in which Saddam Hussein developed WMD caused us to minimize the considerable expenses of disarming him.

- Deterrence cannot be reduced to "the art of threatening." Rather, it involves conveying reassurance at the same time as we convey a countervailing threat. Cold War deterrence was not all about brinksmanship. The Cuban missile crisis was resolved by a trade, not by an "eyeball to eyeball" test of wills. It was less about threat and more about diplomacy, reassurance, and recognizing what the adversary valued.

- Deterrence is not about matching what one's opponent possesses. It made no sense, for example, for the United States to match the Soviet land-based ICBM arsenal when it had offsetting advantages. In modern times, this means asking whether we actually require nuclear weapons to deter, say, Iran.

- Deterrence is not a substitute for diplomacy. The 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea was better for US interests than the alternative of having no agreement and relying on deterrence alone to prevent an attack.

- Deterrence does not always work.

- Deterrence often leads to overcommitment. Once a leader takes a stand, it becomes very difficult to retreat, as the United States experienced in Vietnam and Iraq.

- Deterrence ultimately comes down to making threats credible and commensurate with the offense. The adversary has to believe that the other side will intervene. In that sense, it is not one-size-fits-all.

- Demonstration effects have to be coherent. The Bush Administration has said that Iraq scared Libya into giving up its nuclear program, but ultimately the administration showed that the United States would not intervene militarily to stop North Korea's or Iran's nuclear programs.

- Defensive systems cannot replace deterrence. Even if one assumes 90 percent effectiveness for missile defense, there is still an intolerable probability that in an attack a number of nuclear warheads from a small state would land on US soil.

- Finally, deterrence is inevitable. Even if the United States launched a preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure, Iran would retain some residual capability. We would set back its program, but not terminate it. So in the end, we would still face the task of deterring the regime or compelling it not to reconstitute its program. We face a similar situation with North Korea.

Deterrence and US Force Structure

The disconnect between our current nuclear force structure and the requirements of tailored deterrence has attracted intense scrutiny.

One participant said that our current force structure projects an excessive threat—one beyond what is justified by our security requirements. The size, combined with operational structure, of our nuclear arsenal suggests an intention to preempt with massive force. This person argued that, if the relevant information was furnished to 100 random individuals, they would likely decide that a handful of nuclear weapons, or tens of weapons, constitute a sufficient deterrent. Maintaining thousands of nuclear weapons "violates common sense," causes a daily danger in concert with the Russian arsenal, and leads others to see our nuclear posture as illegitimate. If the United States does not undertake major reforms to render our arsenal a more plausible deterrent, it will become an obstacle to global cooperation.

It was broadly accepted that the United States would not adopt its current force posture if it parachuted into the 21st century and took stock of the logical requirements *de novo*. So, how does one explain US reluctance to change its force posture? While many thought the issue was "overdetermined," conference participants suggested a number of possible causes:

- Concern about the direction of Russia's strategic posture.

- Distaste for cooperative arms control, which would be necessary in any attempt to make large cuts in the size of global arsenals.

- Inertia on the part of policymakers who grew up during the Cold War.

- Fear of the unknown. Nuclear planners understand the meaning of stability at 3,000 warheads, but do not know what it's like to live at 500 or 300 warheads—they will have to "improvise." That is "the great unknown."

- Inertia built into the design of the US government. The Constitution was written to protect minority opinions and allow them to change slowly. Changes can be made on issues where there is broad consensus, but it is not easy to develop consensus on a major operational redesign of our defense complex. We will not automatically settle on a common-sense solution.

- Bureaucratic inertia. Few people care about this issue enough to change it, and the ones who think about US force posture are often not in a position to make decisions. Making changes is bureaucratically riskier than maintaining the status quo—especially when those changes could theoretically result in catastrophic loss.

- America's self-image. The United States has become accustomed to being the most powerful nation in

the world and is used to having more weapons than everybody else.

Conference members agreed that major changes to US force posture cannot happen without determined presidential leadership. Presidents cannot rely on the bureaucracy to alter US force posture, as Bill Clinton did, because no changes will happen. A more useful example was set by George H.W. Bush, who successfully altered our force posture with an executive decision. In this view, the role of nuclear policy experts in changing US nuclear policy should be to persuade the president that he needs to drive the process without waiting for the bureaucracy.

One participant said that experts should enable the president to "make the grand gesture" by delineating what he should say and how he can say it. This person said that, ideally, the president would avoid an argument about whether we should eliminate nuclear weapons; he should say that while we want to eliminate nuclear weapons eventually, we must focus on what we can do in the short run.

Several elements of the president's approach will depend on the force levels he envisions. For example, if the United States reduces its arsenal to hundreds of warheads, it will have to discuss the nature of its future relationship with China. Leaders need to know whether the country will be comfortable with strategic parity between the United States and China, lest they find themselves facing a public backlash as voters realize the country is moving to that level.

It might help to persuade policymakers and voters that the public supports the reduction of our nuclear arsenal. However, some conference participants questioned the value of having a "public strategy," given that people do not often think about nuclear weapons and their minds can easily be changed. For example, the last time the subject came up during the mid-1990s, killing public support for changes proved to be quite simple. A few well-placed op-eds from conservatives provoked sufficient backlash to shut down the conversation. For this reason, experts need to figure out how to frame nuclear reductions for domestic consumption by placing US nuclear weapon strategy—especially the role of nuclear deterrence in the 21st century—in the context of providing more effective and enduring security for the United States public, at home and abroad.

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