

Extended Nuclear Deterrence: Time to Phase Out

by Howard W. Hallmanⁱ

The doctrine of nuclear deterrence is a cold war holdover that has no legitimate function in the 21st century. It therefore should be phased out through a sequence of steps that rids the world of nuclear weapons. So also the subsidiary doctrine of extended nuclear deterrence should be terminated.

This article concentrates on extended deterrence, the doctrine through which the United States provides a “nuclear umbrella” to protect allies which have no nukes of their own from nuclear attack. I believe that it time to phase out this obsolete doctrine, based upon two premises.

First, as I have written in an article on Useless Weaponsⁱⁱ, in the 21st century nuclear weapons have no appropriate use for military combat in contemporary wars and in dealing with terrorists. There are better ways to deal with nations seeking nuclear weapons than threatened or actual nuclear attack. The remaining function is deterrence of other nations’ nuclear arsenals, a task that would no longer be necessary if all nuclear weapons on Earth were eliminated.

Second, I believe that nuclear weapons are cold war relics,ⁱⁱⁱ outmoded but highly dangerous. They are leftovers from the global confrontation between two superpowers and their allies that characterized world politics from 1946 to 1991 and spilled over to other regions. For the five official nuclear weapon states (United States, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, France, and China) military confrontation involving nuclear weapons has virtually disappeared, replaced by competitive trade relations in a global economy. But they are stuck with their nuclear arsenals, now obsolete. Getting rid of them can be aided by phasing out the extended deterrence doctrine and the associated treaties and weapons deployment practices.

Basis in Treaties

The concept of extended nuclear deterrence originated during the first two decades of the Cold War. Policy makers in the United States and Western Europe observed how the Soviet Union had used its military occupation of Eastern Europe following World War II to create a group of satellite communist nations. The western leaders noted that the Soviets had a stronger, much larger conventional force than the Atlantic alliance and therefore might move westward.

Therefore, in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949, the member states of NATO agreed that “an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all” and that they will assist the parties so attacked by taking “such action as deemed necessary, including the use of armed force.” After entering into this treaty the United States indicated that in particular circumstances it would be willing to use nuclear weapons in response to Soviet attack on its NATO allies. This might be either a Soviet nuclear attack or an invasion by overwhelming conventional forces. In this manner, the United States extended its nuclear deterrence doctrine to protect its allies.

In a similar manner the United States applied the doctrine of extended nuclear deterrence to Australia and New Zealand through the ANZUS Treaty of 1951 (though New Zealand later dropped out), to South Korea through the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953, and to Japan through Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security of 1960.

The Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954 had the same relationship with the Republic of China, then consisting of Taiwan, the Pescadores, and some other small islands. This treaty was terminated on January 1, 1980 after the United States established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. But as this was happening, the U.S. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 which authorizes the United States to supply Taiwan with "defense articles and defense services...to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability" and allows the United States to respond to "threats to Taiwan or dangers to United States interests". This provides enough leeway for the U.S. to maintain ambiguous extended deterrence.

Current Threats

To the extent that these treaties justified extended nuclear deterrence in the past, they are obsolete because there are no longer any realistic threats that might require a nuclear response.

- With the Soviet Union dissolved and Eastern Europe nations free, the diminished successor Russian Federation is no longer a threat to Western Europe, either conventional or nuclear. While there are unresolved issues, such as level of conventional forces and status of non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons, there is no need for the United States to hold the nuclear umbrella over Western Europe any longer.
- Although belligerent North Korea is developing nuclear weapons, South Korea and the United States have sufficient conventional power to serve as deterrent. Moreover, experience during the Korean War showed that nuclear weapons have no proper role in warfare on the Korean peninsula.
- As economic ties between Japan and China have grown stronger, the threat of Chinese invasion or nuclear attack on Japan has diminished to virtually non-existence.
- Even if North Korea acquires a few nuclear weapons any potential threat to Japan could be deterred by conventional forces.
- Although relations between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan aren't completely smooth, trade has become more important than the political status of Taiwan. Forced unification through military action is remote.
- Australia is completely free from any nuclear threat.

The absence of real live threats makes it quite feasible for the United States, with proper consultation with its allies, to properly phase out its doctrine of extended nuclear deterrence as expressed in treaty obligations.

Contrary Opinion

A contrary opinion is offered in two recent reports that make the case for continuing the U.S. policy of extended nuclear deterrence.

The first report is *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (2009).^{iv} Established by an act of Congress, this bipartisan Commission was led by William J. Perry, chairman, and James R. Schlesinger, vice-chairman, both former secretaries of defense. Repeatedly the Strategic Posture Commission argues for extended deterrence as an essential element of U.S. nuclear weapons posture, first to assure allies of U.S. protection against potential attack, and second, to persuade them that they don't need to create their own nuclear deterrence. However, their case lacks specific evidence for the need and is contradicted by other findings in their report.

The Strategic Posture Commission rightly indicates:

In surveying more than six decades of history, we are struck by the fact that nuclear weapons have not been used. It is clear that a tradition against the use of nuclear weapons has taken hold. The United States must strive to maintain this tradition and urge all other nuclear armed nations to adhere to it...In at least four wars a nuclear-armed power accepted defeat or stalemate fighting an enemy that did not have a single nuclear bomb: the Korean war, the U.S. war in Vietnam, the Soviet's war in Afghanistan, and China's cross-border attack on Vietnam. (pp. 94-95)

In another article I have referred to this abstinence as a “60+ Year Taboo”.^v This is reinforced by the moral case against nuclear weapons^{vi} that I offer elsewhere. I would ask the members of the Strategic Posture Commission, “precisely what scenarios do you envision that would require President Obama to break this taboo by using nuclear weapons as an application of extended deterrence?” Their report offers no concrete example, suggesting that they are talking theory rather than reality.

Indeed, the Commission report shows the highly unlikely of military situations in today's world where nuclear weapons might be called into use, lending support to my analysis.

Regarding Russia, the Commission indicates, “Currently, no one seriously contemplates a direct Russian attack on the United States.” (p. 24) Russia “is not amassing forces along its borders in readiness for an invasion of Europe.” (p. 11) Even so: “Some U.S. allies are fearful of Russia, and look to the United States for reassurance.”

But if Russia actually undertook military action against a NATO member, such as Poland, Turkey, or any other neighbor, would the United States respond with nuclear weapons, thereby putting the U.S. homeland at risk? The Commission provides no answer, but sixty years experience indicates that nuclear weapons wouldn't be used in such a “little” war. Two NATO candidates – Georgia and Ukraine – are most in danger from Russian interference, but U.S. nuclear weapons offer no protection for either in any practical sense.

Regarding the other cold war rival, the Commission's view is that “the risks of war with China are low, with the primary potential military flashpoint being Taiwan. China and the United States have many differences over Taiwan but Beijing and Washington regularly commit themselves to the principle of peaceful reunification and, moreover, an improvement in the security situation there is evident. The apparent risks of nuclear war are even lower.” (p. 10)

The Commission doesn't deal with Japan or South Korea and provides no evidence that extended nuclear deterrence is now required.

In spite of these conclusions, the Strategic Posture Commission favors extended deterrence to calm allies' fears, not because of real dangers, even though this "may well impose on the United States an obligation to retain numbers and types of nuclear weapons that it might not otherwise deem essential to its own defense." (p. 13)

This a classic tail-wag-the-dog approach. Why should nervous allies determine U.S. nuclear policy when rational analysis indicates that realistically they are not in danger? Why should the United States maintain particular nuclear weapons whose only role is to reassure allies?

Therefore, the United States can appropriately phase out the nuclear option within extended deterrence. Whether and how the conventional option remains is beyond the scope of this article.

The Strategic Posture Commission's other argument for extended nuclear deterrence is that it "reinforces nonproliferation by assuring U.S. allies and friends that they need not create independent nuclear deterrents of their own to be secure." (p. 94) However, the Commission offers no indication of what nations might embark upon this challenging endeavor. Nations with industrial capacity in Europe would face strong public opposition. The same with Japan. Moreover, development of nuclear weapons is an expensive undertaking that takes at least five years and maybe longer to produce results. Without naming candidates the Commission's assertion has no merit.

The second report is *U.S. Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century: Getting it Right*^{vii} by the New Deterrent Working Group. It is the work of ten nuclear weapons advocates who are concerned that "the Obama administration seeks to advance policies with respect to nuclear weapons that...are potentially perilous for America and the many nations around the world that rely on the credibility of our nuclear deterrent." (p. 3)

The New Deterrent Working Group believes that the goal of ridding the world of nuclear weapons runs the risk of getting the United States to accept near-term policies that would be harmful to national security. They are strong advocates of robust nuclear deterrence that extends a nuclear umbrella to U.S. allies. They favor an enduring triad of submarines, land based missiles and bombers, and a robust and layered missile defense. They advocate well-funded nuclear weapons laboratories and ongoing life-extension and modernization programs for weapons and delivery systems. They are skeptical of START negotiations for reducing the number of strategic weapons. They oppose ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

The Working Group speaks of the "vital role of extended deterrence." (pp.33-34). They draw selectively upon favorable comments on that subject from the report of the Strategic Posture Commission. They paraphrase Commission report as saying,

...one key ingredient to a successful extended deterrent: not only maintaining credible nuclear forces, but also *clearly articulating* to allies and adversaries alike the willingness of the United States to *use them*, if necessary. (emphasis by the Working Group).

However, the New Deterrent Working Group omits important qualifications offered by the Strategic Posture Commission. (p.37)

...declaratory policy must reflect the central fact that the United States retains nuclear weapons for the purpose of deterrence – to help create the conditions in which they are never used or even threatened.

The United States should underscore that it conceives of and prepares for the employment of nuclear weapons only for protection of itself and its allies in extreme circumstances. The Commission believes that any president of the United States should avoid pushing a confrontation to the point of nuclear exchange.

The New Deterrent Working Group exercises much less caution in the potential use of nuclear weapons and to some extent shows eagerness for the possibility.

In advocating extended nuclear deterrence the New Deterrent Working Group presents this idea as a theoretical doctrine without analysis of where it might be applicable in the 21st century. In order to contribute to public debate I would ask Working Group members to clearly specify what kind of threats on which nations by whom provide the need for extended deterrence. I would be interested in their response to my analysis provided above on the absence of realistic threats. I would further ask them under what circumstance would they want President Obama to break the 60+ year taboo on the use of nuclear weapons.

Regarding the role of extended deterrence in nonproliferation, the New Deterrent Working Group quotes General Kevin P. Chilton, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, as saying,

“Maintaining a robust nuclear deterrent capability should be seen as important nonproliferation tool for both deterring potential adversaries and reassuring allies.”

They quote Thomas D’Agostino, administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, as indicating that

“allies confident in U.S. extended nuclear deterrence guarantees will not be motivated to pursue their own nuclear forces.”

These statements are expression of opinion, not hard analysis. They do not cite a single nation that would develop nuclear weapons if not for the U.S. assurance. They need specifics to make their case. But as I noted previously, public opinion and lack of commitment of necessary resources is a stronger force for nonproliferation in various nations than the continuation U.S. extended deterrence.

Opportunity for Change

Rather than being stuck with the obsolete doctrine of extended nuclear deterrence forever, we have opportunities to phase out this cold war holdover.

The United States is in the process of a Nuclear Posture Review. Past reviews focused on the continued role of nuclear weapons, not the broader question of the place of nuclear weapons in U.S. global policy. In the case of the Bush Administration in 2002 this resulted in projection of nuclear weapons use until 2030 and beyond. This time the review should work within the context of President Obama's desire to rid the world of nuclear weapons at some time in the future and should outline steps necessary to achieve that goal. This should encompass reexamination of the policy of nuclear deterrence in the 21st century, including extended deterrence and ways to phase out this obsolete policy.

NATO is developing a new Strategic Concept to replace the 1999 version. This process, in which public participation will be encouraged, will include review of NATO's nuclear posture. Here is an opportunity to examine whether the United States should continue to base nuclear weapons in Europe.

A report^{viii} from the National Resources Defense Council indicates that the U.S. has 480 nuclear gravity bombs in eight bases in six countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Turkey, and United Kingdom. (That is more than the entire Chinese nuclear arsenal and more than either of the French or UK arsenal.) This is supposedly part of extended deterrence, but I wonder whether they are potential targets for a first strike if a resurgent Russia wanted to start a nuclear war. Thus, a leaky nuclear umbrella puts these nations at risk.

In balance Russia maintains a reserve of several thousand non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons which makes Europeans wary. Russia has dropped its previous no first use policy for nuclear weapons out of fear of NATO conventional superior, a reversal of the balance during the Cold War. All these concerns should be drawn together in a broad approach to disarmament in Europe, a goal within the self-interest of all nations in the European and North Atlantic community.

In a similar manner a regional approach is needed in Northeast Asia to deal with China's nuclear arsenal, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the U.S. extended deterrence policy, the future of Taiwan, and the desire of some Japanese leaders to go nuclear. Ultimately the self-interest of all these nations would be a nuclear-weapons-free zone for Northeast Asia. Even before this happens the United States should phase out extended nuclear deterrence with the understanding that conventional forces are sufficient for the deterrence task in dealing with North Korea.

Some propose a halfway approach with two "umbrellas": a nuclear umbrella under which nuclear weapons would be used only to deter a nuclear attack, and a conventional umbrella for protection from attack by conventional forces. Others insist that conventional weapons are sufficient to deter "rogue" nations from using nuclear weapons. Paul Nitze made this case in a 1999 op-ed article^{ix} in which he also wrote, "I see no compelling reason why we should not

unilaterally get rid of our nuclear weapons. To maintain them is costly and adds nothing to our security.”

Skeptics argue that nuclear deterrence, direct and extended, has succeeded in preventing nuclear war for sixty years. As noted previously, some believe that extended deterrence by the United States has kept other nations under the U.S. nuclear umbrella from developing their own nuclear arsenal. This is all speculation, for there is no way to prove the reasons for a non-happening.

It’s like the other day when rain was predicted I carried an umbrella with me to downtown Washington, D.C., but it didn’t rain. As I wouldn’t claim that my umbrella prevented the rain, so nuclear weapons advocates have no clear proof that among many reasons why nations have not started nuclear wars it was the threat of nuclear retaliation that forced their restraint.

Rather arguing over what can’t be proved we would be better off working together to eliminate the need for nuclear deterrence altogether by finding ways to rid the world of nuclear weapons.

September 2009

You may comment on this article on our Blog. [Click here.](#)

ⁱ Howard W. Hallman is chair, Methodists United for Peace with Justice. He can be contacted at hwhallman[at]verizon.net.

ⁱⁱ http://www.strategicpeacemaking.org/pdfs/Useless_Weapons.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.zero-nukes.org/Global_Setting_Global_Nuclear_Arsenal_Relics.html

^{iv} http://media.usip.org/reports/strat_posture_report.pdf

^v http://www.zero-nukes.org/Disarmament_Scenarios_Case_Against_Nukes_Moral.html#taboo

^{vi} http://www.zero-nukes.org/Disarmament_Scenarios_Case_Against_Nukes_Moral.html

^{vii} <http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/upload/wysiwyg/center%20publication%20pdfs/NDWG-%20Getting%20It%20Right.pdf>

^{viii} <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/euro/euro.pdf>

^{ix} <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/28/opinion/a-threat-mostly-to-ourselves.html?scp=9&sq=nitze&st=nyt>