

Nuclear Deterrence; Untying the Gordian Knot “If You Want Peace, Prepare for Peace”

Statement of the Western States Legal Foundation to the Third Preparatory Committee
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Looking around the world, we see a growing number of nationalist authoritarian governments and leaders – including in nuclear-armed Russia, Israel, India, China, North Korea and now, the United States. In the other nuclear-armed states, Pakistan, the UK, and France, we see powerful nationalist authoritarian factions waiting in the wings.

The unprecedented fog of war and propaganda surrounding the Russian war on Ukraine and the Israeli war on Gaza, the afore-mentioned rising authoritarian nationalisms, and the conflation of national economic interests with “national security” compound the challenges of understanding the complexities of relationships among nuclear-armed states. *But all of them rely on the doctrine of nuclear deterrence.*

The Latin root of the word deterrence means to “frighten away, fill with fear.”¹ In other words, to threaten.

Nuclear “deterrence” undergirds entire military-industrial establishments and the national security states and elites they serve. It is an elastic ideology which has outlived its Cold War origins and is used by nuclear-armed states to justify the perpetual possession and threatened use – *including first use* – of nuclear weapons.

What does nuclear deterrence really mean? As described in a 2008 U.S. Department of Defense Report:

“Nuclear deterrence is achieved by credibly threatening a potential adversary with the use of nuclear weapons so as to prevent that adversary from taking actions against the United States, its allies, or its vital interests. This is accomplished primarily by maintaining sufficient and effective nuclear capabilities to pose unacceptable costs and risks upon the adversary should it so act...”

“Though our consistent goal has been to avoid *actual* weapons use, the nuclear deterrent is ‘used’ every day by assuring friends and allies, dissuading opponents from seeking peer capabilities to the United States, deterring attacks on the United States and its allies from potential adversaries, and providing the potential to defeat adversaries if deterrence fails.”²

More recently, in a 2021 article, “Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence,” U.S. Navy Admiral Charles Richard, then-Chief of U.S. Strategic Command, wrote:

“We must acknowledge the foundational nature of our nation’s strategic nuclear forces, as they create the ‘maneuver space’ for us to project conventional military power strategically.”³

With Russian and Israeli leadership’s veiled and not-so-veiled nuclear threats, the Russian and Israeli governments have both been using their nuclear deterrents in this way – *so far*. But it is undeniable that the longer these wars go on, the greater the threats of wider regional conflict and the potential for nuclear escalation become.

Let’s look at another example.

In a major policy speech on March 21, 2008, presenting France’s aptly named new nuclear submarine, “*Le Terrible*,” then-President Nikolai Sarkozy proclaimed:

“Our nuclear deterrence protects us from any aggression against our vital interests emanating from a state – wherever it may come from and whatever form it may take... All those who would threaten our vital interests would expose themselves to severe retaliation by France resulting in damages unacceptable to them, out of proportion with their objectives. Their centers of political, economic and military power would be targeted on a priority basis.”

Then, he ominously indicated how a “strictly defensive” use of nuclear deterrence might involve a first strike

“It cannot be ruled out that an adversary might miscalculate the delimitation of our vital interests or our determination to safeguard them. In the framework of nuclear deterrence, it would be possible, in that event, to send a nuclear warning that would underscore our resolve. That would be aimed at reestablishing deterrence.”

And, he declared:

“France is and will remain true to its commitments under Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty. As for Europe, it is a fact: By their very existence, French nuclear forces are a key element in Europe’s security. Any aggressor who might consider challenging it must be mindful of this. Let us, together, draw every logical consequence of this situation. *I propose to engage those European partners who would so wish in an open dialogue on the role of deterrence and its contribution to our common security.*”⁴

This statement was made a long time ago, but it has new resonance today. In light of the Russian Federation’s ongoing illegal war of aggression in Ukraine with its attendant drumbeat of nuclear threats, and a U.S. ally increasing seen as unreliable, a number of former and current European government officials and politicians have called for some form of an independent European nuclear force. In early March, French President Macron announced, “I’ve decided to open the strategic debate on the protection by our deterrence of our allies on the European continent,”⁵ Officials from Germany, Poland, Denmark, Lithuania, and Latvia have welcomed Macron’s initiative, which also aims to include nuclear-armed UK.⁶

Such an arrangement would at a minimum, undermine the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). But more alarming is the growing normalization of nuclear threats and the legitimization of nuclear proliferation suggested by its proponents.

The policy of nuclear deterrence is not passive, and it is not benign. Over half the world's population lives in countries whose national security postures explicitly depend on nuclear weapons and the doctrine of nuclear deterrence.”⁷ Nuclear deterrence threatens the murder of many millions of innocent people, along with severe economic, climate, environmental, agricultural and health consequences beyond the area of attack.

According to proponents, maintaining “credible” nuclear deterrents will require massive new investments in the nuclear weapons infrastructures of the nuclear-armed states.

The modernization programs underway in the U.S., Russia, China, France, and the UK clearly run counter to their NPT obligation to pursue negotiations *in good faith* on cessation of the nuclear arms race *at an early date*.

The hard truth is that none of the nuclear-armed states are willing to reimagine a global system that puts universal human security above narrow “national security” interests enforced by nuclear coercion - euphemistically called deterrence.

For the first time in decades, elements of governments in a number of additional countries are openly discussing the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons of their own. If this comes to pass, it will gravely weaken the viability of the NPT.

As the Canberra Commission found in 1996, a more hopeful time:

“Nuclear weapons are held by a handful of states which insist that these weapons provide unique security benefits, and yet reserve uniquely to themselves the right to own them. This situation is highly discriminatory and thus unstable; it cannot be sustained. The possession of nuclear weapons by any state is a constant stimulus to other states to acquire them.”

“The proposition that nuclear weapons can be retained in perpetuity and never used – accidentally or by decision – defies credibility. The only complete defence is the elimination of nuclear weapons and assurance that they will never be produced again.”⁸

But, as Matt Korda, with the Federation of American Scientists notes:

“[P]eople should be aware of the fact that countries are planning on maintaining nuclear weapons for the next 60, 70, 80 years..... They’re planning on keeping nuclear weapons around longer than many of us are going to be alive.”⁹

And, as Daniel Ellsberg reminded us:

“What is missing is the recognition that what is being discussed is dizzyingly insane and immoral.”¹⁰

We must find a way to fundamentally challenge the dominant paradigm of “national security” through military might at any cost.

We need to collectively move from the irrational fear-based ideology of deterrence to the rational fear of an eventual nuclear weapon use, whether by accident or design, by a nuclear-armed state that places the threatened use of nuclear weapons at the core of its national security policy. We also need to stimulate a rational hope that security can be redefined in humanitarian and ecologically sustainable terms that will lead to the elimination of nuclear weapons and dramatic demilitarization.

As recognized in the 1945 Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization:

“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”¹¹

In 1990, Olzhas Suleimenov, a leading poet and Deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet and founder of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement in Qazaqstan, declared:

“It’s time to reject the dictates of the Roman Empire: If you want peace, prepare for war. ***If you want peace prepare for peace.***”¹²

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Cameroon Youths and Students Forum for Peace (CAMYOSFOP)

International

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Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Abolition 2000 Nuclear Risk Reduction Working Group

Citations

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² Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapons Management, Phase I: The Air Force's Nuclear Mission, September 2008, p. 1, https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/report/2008/nuclear-weapons_phase-1_2008-09-10.htm

³ [Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence | Proceedings - February 2021 Vol. 147/2/1,416 \(usni.org\)](#)

⁴ https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Speech_by_Nicolas_Sarkozy_presentation_of_Le_Terrible_submarine.pdf

⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/05/europe/macron-france-nuclear-arsenal-ukraine-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁶ <https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-04-17/atomic-bombs-and-landmines-european-countries-debate-their-red-lines-for-dealing-with-russia.html>

⁷ [Why Mideast Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone is Critical \(pressenza.com\)](#)

⁸ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/international-relations/Pages/the-canberra-commission-on-the-elimination-of-nuclear-weapons>

⁹ [Disarmament Grows More Distant as US Plans Another “Upgrade” to Nuclear Bomb | Truthout](#)

¹⁰ [End the Insanity: For Nuclear Disarmament and Global Demilitarization - CounterPunch.org](#)

¹¹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/constitution>

¹² Personal recollection of author