Deterrence

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Permit me to begin with a little story. On Monday morning, I was on my way in my car, at Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Connecticut, to pick up a cup of coffee before going to teach a class. As I pulled up to the coffee shop, I realized it was near the top of the hour, and I decided to wait for the news, on National Republic Radio—a reliable source. The announcer’s first sentence astounded me. “The five major nuclear powers,” he said, “have committed themselves at the Nuclear Nonproliferation Conference in New York to the abolition of nuclear weapons.” I was listening to National Public Radio—a reliable source. I almost fell out of my car. I confess to you that I permitted myself a moment of optimism. But no further explanation was offered. I was left to picture the moment for myself. I imagined the foreign ministers lined up at a solemn press conference announcing their stunning change of heart and of policy. Even if the announcement was mainly cosmetic, I thought, the commitment would be useful in the years to come. The news seemed worthy of the day around me: it was the peak of spring; the sun was shining; trees were in flower. Were we at last on our way to lifting the shadow that had fallen over all of us, over life itself, when we invented nuclear arms? And why not? Once you imagined that the decision had been made, it seemed mere common sense, the bare minimum of sanity and decency; any other decision seemed grotesque, unfathomable.

Well, I think you know what the truth of the matter was: the announcer was referring to the long statement by the Permanent Five, made later that afternoon, in which they “reiterated” their commitment to Article Six of the Nonproliferation Treaty. In context, it was clear that the document represented no change of heart, no change of policy. There had been no foreign ministers lined up, no follow-up announced. In case anyone doubted this, they had only to read the recently leaked text of the assurance by the United States to Russia that “Both the USA and the Russian Federation now possess and, as before, will possess under the terms of any possible future arms reduction agreements, large, diversified, viable arsenals of strategic offensive weapons consisting of various types of ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers,” or to note the recent statement by the American Deputy Secretary of Defense Hamry that “Nuclear weapons are the foundation of a superpower; that will never change.”

All of which brings me to policy, and my topic today, which is the intellectual foundation of that policy, the doctrine of deterrence.

There is by now a considerable body of criticism of the doctrine, and I cannot set forth those arguments here, except to summarize them quickly.

Deterrence is illogical: It drapes a veneer of reason over sheer mayhem and horror. It rests on a basic contradiction that no amount of casuistry can conceal: it seeks to prevent nuclear annihilation by threatening that same nuclear war. It seeks, at one and the same time, so to speak, to be the accelerator and the brakes of the nuclear machine. Consider for one moment the transaction at the doctrine’s core. The central proposition of deterrence is that we prevent nuclear war by threatening nuclear retaliation. Let us suppose, though, that a nuclear attack has taken place. The policy of deterrence has failed. Why then retaliate? The reason for retaliating has dissolved with the arrival of the strike that was to be deterred. But if, in the event, executing the threat makes no sense, what sense can it make to announce the threat in the first place?
Let us not, by the way, confuse the doctrine of deterrence, which sanctions and even requires the building of nuclear arsenals, with the common sense proposition that once these are built, the leaders of a nuclear power, if they are sane, will probably be exceptionally cautious about getting into wars with another nuclear power. This common sense reluctance to get into a nuclear war does not by any means require nuclear arsenals, and is obviously much better served by not having nuclear arsenals in the first place.

Deterrence is immoral: it condemns all nuclear armed nations in complicity to do what no nation should ever do, namely kill hundreds of millions of innocent people and put the life of the human species in jeopardy.

The use of nuclear weapons prescribed by deterrence, therefore, and not surprisingly, is illegal under international law. Deterrence, speaking soberly and without the slightest exaggeration, is an openly announced doctrine of retaliatory genocide. It envisions and requires as its final act the destruction of nations.

Deterrence is impractical. First, owing to the contradiction at its heart, it tends to cause the very thing it promises to prevent, namely nuclear crises that can lead to nuclear war. In the meantime, as an increasing number of military experts have recognized, the weapons are militarily useless. In this connection, permit me to note that four of the P-5 have fought and lost conventional wars against small, non-nuclear powers, without being able to extract the slightest advantage from their nuclear monopolies. I speak of England in Suez; of the United States in Vietnam; of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan; and of China in its border war with Vietnam in 1979.

But I cannot elaborate on these arguments. Instead, permit me to refer you to an outstanding new book “The Naked Nuclear Emperor” by Commander Robert Green, which sets them forth definitively.

The points I especially wish to make here today are quite different ones. I want to discuss the quite new mischief that this doctrine is doing at our particular historical moment.

First, I think we make a mistake when we regard deterrence as a particular doctrine for managing nuclear arsenals. I think we will understand it better if we see it almost as a kind of intellectual secretion of the weapons themselves. Historically, nuclear weapons were not built to serve the purposes of deterrence; rather deterrence was discovered to justify, or rationalize nuclear weapons. Wherever nuclear weapons spread, there soon you will find deterrence. Look how quickly India and Pakistan have gravitated to the doctrine, including even, in India, to its accidental corollary that a triad of nuclear forces on air, land, and sea is necessary.

Now I come to the crux of the matter. What has not been fully appreciated—but what we are now in a position to appreciate—is that deterrence doctrine is, on the intellectual level, a prime engine of proliferation. At its core is the idea that in a nuclear-armed world, only those nations that possess nuclear weapons are safe. To the question, Why do we have nuclear weapons?, deterrence answers, Because the other fellow has them—he must be deterred. If this reasoning is not a global call to proliferation, what would be? In my country and in other nuclear powers, we hear nuclear arsenals called “our deterrent.” In current circumstances, there is much more reason to call these arsenals “our proliferant.”

This is not mere juggling with words. A central lesson of deterrence theory is that the psychological effects of nuclear arms are of even greater importance than the physical ones. For according to the theory, deterrence “works” when the minds of the leaderships on both sides of a nuclear standoff are so deeply impressed with the fear of the other side’s retaliation that they do not dare to strike in the first place. What we may call “proliferance,” too, is a psychological effect of nuclear weapons. Proliferance occurs when a country, fearful of a neighbor’s nuclear arsenals, builds one in response. The difference
between deterrence and proliferation is that whereas deterrence stops nations that possess nuclear arsenals from using them, proliferation inspires nations that lack them to get them. In a sense, therefore, the two effects arrive at a common destination: the possession—but not, it is hoped, the use—by all nuclear capable nations of nuclear weapons.

Any number of politicians around the world have stated that nuclear proliferation is the greatest threat to the security of the world today. In the post-cold-war world, the effects of proliferation are much easier to demonstrate than those of deterrence. It was proliferation that led India, looking over the Himalayas to China and beyond China to Russia and the United States to turn itself into a nuclear power, and it was proliferation that goaded Pakistan to conduct its nuclear tests that same month. This influence acts both by example (the nuclear “paradigm” cited by India) and, even more powerfully, through the direct influence of the terror that is the chief product of nuclear arsenals. The proliferant influence of nuclear terror has, indeed, been in operation since the earliest days of the nuclear age. For the clear lesson of history is that nuclear arsenals breed nuclear arsenals. Even the United States—the first nation to build the bomb—did so in a sense reactively. President Roosevelt and his advisors were worried that Hitler would get the bomb first. The Soviet Union then built the bomb in response to the United States; China built it in response to both the United States and Russia; India built it in response to China; and Pakistan built it in response to India. Every nuclear arsenal is linked to every other nuclear arsenal in the world by these powerful links of terror and response. Deterrence is indeed the codification and institutionalization of this reactive cycle.

Thus deterrence does not merely defend existing arsenals; it commends nuclear weapons to others. It is the intellectual fuel that propels proliferation. Either deterrence is right and nuclear weapons are good, in which case their spread around the world is a fine thing, or deterrence is wrong, and they should be abolished.

I arrive at a conclusion that will not surprise you: the only true and lasting bulwark for nonproliferation is an authentic commitment by the nuclear powers to the abolition of nuclear weapons. When that happens, we’ll all have the experience, tinged with real joy, that I had for just a few minutes on Monday, except that it will not fade in a few hours. It will deepen, and go on and on, as will the human and other life that has been safeguarded by this great and good and necessary historic deed, which is the only real remedy to the danger we brought on ourselves when we invented nuclear arms.