

The Truth About Nuclear Deterrence

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The Latin root of the word deterrence means to “frighten away, fill with fear.” The threatened use of the most powerful weapons of mass destruction ever devised, to “frighten away, fill with fear,” is euphemistically called “nuclear deterrence.” It permeates the military-industrial-national security establishments of the most powerful states and the elites they serve. It is an elastic ideology, expressed almost as a religious belief, used by nuclear-armed states and those under their nuclear “umbrellas” to justify the perpetual possession and threatened use – *including first use* – of nuclear weapons, for any number of ambiguous and largely unspecified reasons.

According to Project 2025, the playbook for the second Trump administration:

“Nuclear deterrence is one of the most critical elements of U.S. national security, as it forms a backstop to U.S. military forces.... Ever since the U.S. first acquired nuclear weapons, Administrations of both parties have pursued a strategy designed to deter nuclear *and* non-nuclear attack; assure allies; and, in the event of nuclear employment, restore deterrence at the lowest possible cost to the U.S. *Today, however, America’s ability to meet these goals is increasingly challenged by the growing nuclear threats posed by our adversaries.*”¹

The unprecedented fog of war and propaganda surrounding the Russian war on Ukraine, the U.S./Israeli war on Iran and ongoing Israeli bombardment of Gaza, rising authoritarian nationalisms, the conflation of national economic interests with “national security,” and the growing lack of trust among NATO members and other traditional U.S. allies that the U.S. will shield them with its “nuclear umbrella,” compound the complexities of relationships among nuclear-armed states. But all of them rely on the doctrine of nuclear deterrence – *the threatened use of nuclear weapons*.

What does nuclear deterrence actually mean? A 2008 U.S. Department of Defense Report states:

“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

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

“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

In the current conflicts in which nuclear-armed states are attacking non-nuclear states, it appears that the Russian, Israeli, and U.S. governments have been using their nuclear deterrents in this way to keep potential nuclear-armed adversaries and their allies at bay. But 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 an example from another nuclear-armed state.

In a March 2, 2026 major policy speech, delivered from France's naval base in Brittany, President Emanuel Macron proclaimed:

“... I stand before you today, at the heart of the Île Longue base, a cathedral of our sovereignty and a symbol of our country's constant commitment to nuclear deterrence for more than 65 years....

In a few days, the [Ballistic Missile Submarine] *Le Téméraire*.... will take to the sea. It will drop into total stealth and will play its full role, from the depths, as the ultimate guardian of our freedom of action and our independence.”

Unbelievably, but fittingly, the English translation of *Le Téméraire* is *The Reckless*.

Macron continued:

“My responsibility is to ensure that our deterrent maintains.... its power of assured destruction in the dangerous moving environment.... As a consequence, I have decided to increase the number of warheads of our arsenal. To put an end to any speculation, we will no longer release figures on our nuclear arsenal, as we have done in the past. ***To be free, we must be feared, and to be feared, we must be powerful. This increase in our arsenal is a testament to this.***”⁴

Macron also announced that under a new “forward deterrence” strategy for Europe, the UK, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden, and Denmark, could take part in exercises of France's air-launched nuclear capacity and also host air bases where France's nuclear bombers could be stationed. But he was clear that the President of France will retain sole decision-making power over when to fire a nuclear missile.⁵

The same day, Macron and German Chancellor Merz issued a Joint Declaration “Strengthening Franco-German Cooperation in the Field of Deterrence.” It states:

“This Franco-German cooperation is based on the shared understanding that the nuclear dimension of deterrence remains a cornerstone of European security, relying on US extended deterrence, including US nuclear weapons forward-deployed to Europe, and on the independent strategic nuclear forces of France and the United Kingdom.... This Franco-German cooperation will add to, not substitute for, NATO's nuclear deterrence and NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.... ***France and Germany will continue to comply with their obligations under international law including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.***”⁶

Really? This arrangement, at a minimum, runs counter to and undermines the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. But more alarming is the growing normalization of nuclear threats and the legitimization of nuclear proliferation suggested by its proponents.

According to Rafael Grossi, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, North Korea is making “very serious” progress in its ability to produce more nuclear weapons.⁷ In early March, North Korea launched a missile from a naval destroyer. North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-un, declared that the launch was proof that arming ships with nuclear weapons was “making satisfactory progress.” His reference to nuclear weapons was a signal to the world, as the U.S. and Israel continued their bombardment of Iran. The widening war in the Middle East and the existential threat to the Iranian regime appear to have reinforced North Korea’s determination to build up its “nuclear deterrent” as a matter of its own regime’s survival.⁸

Donald Trump’s shocking April 7 threat to Iran, “A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again,” was interpreted by some as a nuclear threat, a reasonable concern given this unhinged U.S. President’s sole authority to launch nuclear weapons.

According to the nuclear-armed states, maintaining “credible” nuclear deterrents will require massive new investments in their nuclear weapons infrastructures. France has joined the UK, China, India, and North Korea as countries known or believed to be increasing the *size* of their nuclear arsenals. With the expiration of New START, there is a real possibility that the United States and Russia will decide to increase their arsenals. And all of the nuclear armed states are engaged in costly programs to make qualitative upgrades to their nuclear forces.

“Mad King” Trump’s proposed 2027 budget requests a 42 percent increase in military spending, bringing the total U.S. war budget to an unprecedented \$1.5 Trillion.⁹ And this does not include the administration’s emergency request of \$200 Billion to support the senseless U.S.-Israeli war with Iran – a war officially being waged, in part, to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁰

Meanwhile Trump wants to raise spending on U.S. nuclear weapons by 12 percent to maintain and modernize its nuclear triad, building on existing plans to develop new ballistic missile submarines, new silo-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, a new nuclear cruise missile, a modified gravity bomb, a new stealthy long-range strike bomber, and accompanying warheads for each delivery system, with modified or newly manufactured plutonium cores.¹¹

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

Now, for the first time in decades, elements of governments in a number of countries, including Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, are openly discussing the possibility of acquiring “nuclear deterrents” of their own. If this comes to pass, it will effectively spell the end of the NPT regime.

Over half the world’s population lives in countries whose national security postures explicitly depend on the doctrine of nuclear deterrence, threatening the murder of many millions of innocent people, with severe economic, climate, environmental, agricultural and health consequences beyond the area of attack.

As the Canberra Commission concluded thirty years ago:

“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.... 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.*”¹²

And, as Daniel Ellsberg reminded us: “What is missing is the recognition that what is being discussed is dizzyingly insane and immoral.”¹³

We must find a way 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.

In 1990, following the end of the Cold War, 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.*”¹⁴

References

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¹⁴ Personal recollection of the author

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