

# Is Nuclear Strategy a Contradiction in Terms?

Written by Paul Leo Clark

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## Is Nuclear Strategy a Contradiction in Terms?

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From their initial, and only, use in World War II, nuclear bombs have adopted a prominent role in world affairs. There are currently nine countries which are believed to possess them, suggesting that they have a strategic impact, with the Cold War emphasizing their significance when tensions rise between major powers. Despite this, their non-use for over 65 years has been cited as evidence that no real strategy has been adopted with regard to them. Nevertheless, there are a number of topics that raise questions, such as nuclear attack not just from a major power, but whether or not rogue states or terrorist groups would be willing to use them, as well as questions relating to their irrelevance in the modern world, or in regards to military use, suggesting they hold a diplomatic value.

While nuclear weapons are widely understood, it may be necessary to first define 'strategy', as it is a term that is rarely given just a single definition. David Lonsdale defines it as "The art of using military force against an intelligent foe(s) towards the attainment of policy objectives".[1] While this appears to be a largely comprehensive definition, Colin Gray perhaps offers a better alternative as he highlights not just force, but "the threat of force".[2] The threat, rather than actual use, is critical here given the dormant nature of nuclear weapons, which focuses on achieving an uneasy equilibrium between states to favour their non-use. Thus, Gray's definition will be a main focal point when assessing this question, as the threat of nuclear warfare cannot simply be dismissed.

The only use of nuclear weapons occurred in 1945, as America sought Japan's surrender, which shortly followed the two nuclear attacks. It has been suggested that this was not solely due to the use of such a powerful weapon, as other factors were perhaps even more important, such as the US's control of the air, and Russia's venture into the Pacific.[3] Nevertheless, the bombs were important, and there was certainly a strategy adopted by the US with regards to their use. The US aimed to surprise the Japanese, unleashing weapons that have never before been used, hoping that the shock value would have a large enough psychological impact on both military and civilian citizens to pressure the government to surrender.[4] While the other factors may have played a large role in inducing Japanese surrender, the role of the atomic bomb cannot be ignored, and the US's strategy of 'shock and awe' certainly provided a strategic advantage, and thus at the time the term 'nuclear strategy' was valid, as it incorporated the use of military force to achieve policy objectives: Japan's surrender with the hope of ending the war.

Following the acquisition of nuclear-based arms by the Soviet Union in 1949, and three years later by Britain, the gradual development of horizontal proliferation was inevitably going to raise questions relating to strategy against other nuclear armed actors. The Cold War was dominated by nuclear thought, with a number of competing theories offered as to how to gain a strategic advantage. Deterrence became the dominant strategy, which is an action that persuades an adversary to not implement certain behaviours, such as invasion or attack. Both the US and the Soviet Union believed that, with a large enough stockpile of nuclear weapons, the other would not contemplate an attack, or would be confronted with nuclear force. This gave rise to the strategies 'Assured Destruction' (AD) and later 'Mutually Assured Destruction' (MAD), which suggested that any use of nuclear weapons from either superpower would inevitably result in widespread chaos for both sides.[5] However, tensions rose alongside the number of warheads each state possessed, with both believing the other was ready to attack. A first-strike bonus may have been granted to the state who would initiate nuclear war, as they could target their opponent's arsenal, neutralising their nuclear threat which would pave the way for strategic advantage if only one side then possessed nuclear weapons. However, this strategy was feasible only for a very limited period of time as, once both states possessed huge numbers of warheads reaching into the thousands, it would be highly unlikely, if not impossible, to guarantee

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they would all be destroyed, thus making the aggressor highly susceptible to a retaliatory strike.

Furthermore, as technology developed, new means of delivering nuclear devices appeared, resulting in a possible three-pronged assault: attack from aircraft, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Even if it were possible to completely eliminate just one form of assault, it would not be possible to destroy all three. There would be no first-strike bonus as retaliation was guaranteed, and so to launch a nuclear attack would induce suicide, eliminating the notion that there was a strategic advantage to be gained. Thus, the US's policy of 'massive retaliation', which threatened response against certain actions, lacked credibility as it was unlikely that the Soviets could pursue an action that would warrant nuclear response with such dire consequences, and would also be a hugely disproportionate response.[6]

In addition, if the US engaged in a first-strike, they would have faced a huge backlash, both internationally and domestically, and would thus not fulfil the negative goals of war, such as maintaining public support, which can be hugely influential as witnessed in the opposition to US involvement in Vietnam.[7] This too contributes to overall strategy, rather than merely tactics, and so first-use would be detrimental on a number of fronts, thus eliminating it as a strategic option. However, it could be argued that to have to act in a reactionary manner is, paradoxically, a strategy within itself. There is thought given to what should be done with nuclear weapons, and so by their non-use, an opposing state's first-use would delegitimize them on the international stage, thus presenting an opportunity for retaliation.

A similar critique could be made of the notion that nuclear weapons can be used in a tactical sense, such as on the battlefield against military targets, rather than at political or civilian ones. Thus, when President Eisenhower in 1955 claimed that when used on "strictly military targets" he saw no reason why they should not be used like "a bullet or anything else", his claim was somewhat invalid, despite a belief that the combination of tactical and strategic arms could form a 'comprehensive nuclear strategy'.[8] This ignores public perception of nuclear weapons, making policy objectives, and thus grand strategy, extremely difficult if a democratic government is strongly opposed by its people. Employment of tactical bombs erodes the barrier between non-use, use, and strategic use, and in practice would likely escalate to the use of strategic warheads if one side began to lose.[9] Again, implementation of nuclear weapons on any level is likely to prove counterproductive in terms of achieving grand strategy, whether that includes domestic policy or simply state survival, and so for a major power nuclear strategy is largely a contradiction in terms.

One of the most significant problems relating to nuclear strategy is the behaviour of states should deterrence fail. Horizontal proliferation means more actors now possess nuclear arms and so there may be a greater likelihood they will be used. It is difficult to devise a strategy based on nuclear threats that could ensure an outcome that does not conclude in widespread destruction.[10] If the state being deterred refuses to accept conditions and continues their behaviour, this leaves the initiator with two responses: either back down and face humiliation, with future threats largely undermined, or follow through with the nuclear threat. States are unlikely to pick the former option, and it may only be a matter of time before the latter is implemented. Although some may argue nuclear defence could prevent this, it may induce the opposite, as one reason the US refused to wage nuclear war was that it simply would not be in their interests given their lack of defence.[11] States with nuclear defence are seen as a threat, as deterrence is likely to fail against them, which may influence another actor to increase their nuclear arms or defence. The result is a security dilemma in which one's initial actions result in even greater uncertainty and insecurity, thus increasing tension and perhaps escalating to conflict. For the same reason, 'massive retaliation' is highly provocative, and may induce an adversary to increase their nuclear capabilities for fear of attack, and so to adopt this strategy would be largely counterproductive.[12] As such, both deterrence and nuclear defence are severely limited as strategies that states may pursue; deterrence is simply not a thorough strategy as there is too great a reliance on chance, and defence may simply increase the likelihood of attack, both lending support to the notion that nuclear strategy is a contradiction in terms.

Despite such a heavy focus on the military uses of nuclear weapons, they also offer a possessor greater status on the world stage via non-military use. Their possession is often cited as a requirement for great power status, with all five permanent members of the Security Council being nuclear armed. Lawrence Freedman suggests that there is often too much attention devoted to the military when dealing with strategy, and that there are other means by which states

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can achieve policy objectives; military strength can be manipulated into diplomatic force.[13] Nuclear weapon possession is one way of achieving great status in the international realm, offering structural power.[14] This develops into other forms of respect as a state may be seen as beyond the boundaries of war and thus powerful, influencing commerce, finance and even military affairs, all a result from the ownership of nuclear weapons; and thus they can certainly hold value with regards to a state's strategy. However, it has been suggested that this role for nuclear weapons is over-elaborate as a means to achieve policy ends. Nuclear weapons, despite being by no means a form of new technology, are still expensive, especially if a formidable arsenal is to be maintained. It may be more beneficial for a state to simply pursue economic aims, and possession of nuclear weapons offers little to a major state than becoming hugely influential in the economical arena. Brazil and Japan are two examples of this, with the former recently overtaking the UK (a nuclear state) to become the world's sixth largest economy in the world. Thus even the diplomatic, non-military role of nuclear weapons in strategy may be largely irrelevant in the face of other routes to state success.

One problem that often arises in literature when dealing with the use of nuclear weapons is that research tends to be linear, focusing on the capabilities of modern, powerful states. Whereas many strategies in these circumstances have been discussed, the behaviour of so-called 'rogue states' such as Iran and North Korea is often overlooked. Freedman argued that strategic threat must also be looked at from "any politically conscious collectivity...and not just by states, let alone great powers".[15] They may not follow 'conventional' nuclear behaviour, and could actually implement them into a strategy. Saddam Hussein's refusal to fully co-operate with UN inspections is evidence of this. While this claim materialised into being false, Saddam may have gained strategic benefit from adversaries simply suspecting he possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and so provided a defensive advantage amid growing tensions with Iran as they may have been reluctant to invade a country suspected of possessing such powerful weapons. Furthermore, he may have been able to secure his position as the threat of WMDs against internal uprisings would ensure they did not gather much support due to the psychological terror they provide. Whilst this may be more applicable to chemical and biological weapons rather than nuclear, the premise remains the same and so does provide a degree of strategic advantage.

Furthermore, rogue states may adopt a strategy of minimal deterrence (MD). This strategy holds the belief that the possession of hundreds or thousands of nuclear warheads is largely unnecessary, such as the stockpiles of the US and Russia. Instead of an Armageddon-like result of nuclear war, an actor may hold the ability to inflict limited, but still very serious, damage to a potential aggressor.[16] It is not quite absolute deterrence, but enough to cause a degree of uncertainty in the mind of another nuclear-armed state with greater capability. Had Libya not disarmed in 2003, the possibility remains that NATO may not have decided to intervene in 2011 due to fear of retaliation, and could be a key factor in NATO's hesitation when dealing with North Korea and, more recently, Iran. This is certainly a form of nuclear strategy, as if these states' political aim is survival and freedom from intervention, providing a means of fulfilling policy objectives. With regards to smaller states such as Iran, defensive aims are arguably more prominent than those of larger states such as the US, and so strategy may be viewed as more 'negative', providing a base for which to explore domestic policy, rather than international development.

A final notion of strategy relating to nuclear weapons is that it may offer a nation freedom of action and choice in the face of pressure from larger power. This is because a nuclear-armed state would not have to rely on others for their security, especially if potential aggressors believed they had the credibility to follow through with threats.[17] Whereas larger nuclear states are unlikely to engage in a first-strike use, the behaviour of some states is far less predictable, increasing their credibility. This nuclear strategy may render the balance of power irrelevant in the international system, as nations are no longer required to form alliances against actors more powerful than themselves. This may still hold true in an economic sense, such as Europe uniting in the face of American and Asian competition, but perhaps not so much for the military. Thus, nuclear strategy may profoundly shape relations between states, and it would be somewhat invalid to claim that nuclear-strategy is a contradiction in terms for all states, as it certainly gifts a strategic benefit to some actors.

If we accept Freedman's thought that strategic threat is not a solely state-based phenomenon, then nuclear strategy from terrorist groups must also be analysed, as it could be argued that they are the actors who would most likely pursue actual use of nuclear force.[18] Unlike states, terrorists have no real land or citizens to protect and so the

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principles of deterrence are largely irrelevant, as a state cannot use nuclear weapons. It would not be feasible to respond against a state with nuclear force where the terrorists are believed to reside, as this would be viewed both domestically and internationally as an overly aggressive approach and thus highly opposed.[19] Terrorist use would arguably follow the strategy employed in the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, with a huge psychological impact on civilians. Even the threat of nuclear force may be sufficient to achieve such aims. While it is hugely unlikely that a terrorist group would have the knowledge or resources to build a nuclear device, there is a possibility that one could either be stolen from a state, such as following civil war as could have happened in Libya following Muammar al Gaddafi's death, or gifted by a nation sympathetic to a group's interests. Thus, even while this may be unlikely, it would be unwise to dismiss such thought, and terrorists may well implement such nuclear strategy.

Overall, it would not be valid to claim definitively either way that nuclear strategy is, or is not, a contradiction in terms, as this relies heavily on context. For the majority of states, offensive nuclear strategy is simply not feasible, and it is highly unlikely that even rogue states would implement a first-strike strategy due to fear of, perhaps massive, retaliation. They still have a role in terms of defensive strategy however, and may have resulted in the most peaceful inter-state relations in history. Furthermore, for non-state actors such as terrorist organisations, nuclear strategy may well be a means to their aims, which, although not falling within conventional political thought, cannot be dismissed. As such, nuclear weapons still heavily influence behaviour, and while some strategies are more regressive than others with a degree of uncertainty somewhat undermining them all, nuclear weapons provide a means to achieve policy objectives, even at the most basic level of state survival, and thus can be said to be either a strategy within itself, or at least an issue that strongly affects strategic decisions.

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