



The Deterrence Dirty Dozen

A Beyond Nuclear Fact Sheet



Preamble

The concept of “deterrence” is that the possession of nuclear weapons by one country would “deter” another nuclear weapons country — or even non-nuclear weapons country — from attacking. This has led to countries justifying their production of nuclear weapons as a national security measure while claiming they would only be used if already attacked by another nuclear country.

On closer examination, this thinking quickly becomes convoluted and illogical. And in reality there are more realpolitik reasons for having nuclear weapons — to offset conventional imbalance, prevent regime change, retain a seat on the UN Security Council, and so forth.

Nevertheless, deterrence is the cornerstone of defense policy and spending among all the major super powers. An estimated \$100 billion is spent globally each year on nuclear weapons. This amount could solve most, if not all, the problems — including climate change, famine, poverty and disease — that cause transboundary conflicts in the first place. The very existence of nuclear weapons results in their perpetual justification.



Premise #1: If we have nuclear weapons, this will deter other nuclear weapons countries from attacking us.

Reality check: If countries agree they need nuclear weapons to deter each other, then they can just as effectively disarm. To buy into deterrence, each country would have to be **100% certain that the other would use their nuclear weapons**, even if that would invite their own destruction. If certainty is not believable, then deterrence loses credibility. And if a nuclear country believes that its opponent **would** use nuclear weapons, it might use its own first, to knock out the enemy before he knocked out them. Plus, a nuclear weapons-armed foe under nuclear attack would likely use their own in retaliation. Then, instead, of deterrence, the result is “mutually assured destruction,” the worst possible outcome.



Premise # 2: Deterrence works because no country would use nuclear weapons given the consequences are so horrible.

Reality check: First, if a weapon is too horrible ever to use, is it even a weapon? If it is militarily useful only if you don’t use it, then it is fundamentally useless. Second, for deterrence to work under this premise, an opposing country would have to be **100% certain its enemy would not use nuclear weapons**. And if you know with 100% certainty that your enemy will

never use nuclear weapons, then it is neither a weapon nor a deterrent. Finally, there would have to be **100% certainty that the chances of failure of deterrence are zero**, since even a one percent chance of failure could have catastrophic consequences. A zero failure rate for deterrence is not realistic given the many possibilities for human error or even insanity. Such an error could include an accidental launch, or a launch under the mistaken belief that a nuclear attack has been launched by an adversary.



Premise #3: The US must maintain a “credible” deterrent in order to protect its allies in Europe from a Russian attack. Russia could easily use nuclear weapons to “take over” all of Europe.

Reality check: The belief here is that Russia would launch an “unprovoked” attack to take over Europe. If it used nuclear weapons, there would not be much left of Europe to “take over” and the US would retaliate with nuclear weapons, so this would be a suicide mission for Russia. If Russia took over Europe using conventional weapons, and the US then attacked Russia with nuclear weapons, Russia would retaliate with its nuclear weapons, leading to mutually assured destruction. None of this meets deterrence.



Premise #4: Nuclear weapons will keep the peace and deter war.

Reality check: While possessing nuclear weapons, the US has fought wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq and Russia has invaded Afghanistan, Crimea and Ukraine. Argentina attacked the British-owned Falkland Islands, even though Britain is a nuclear weapons power. No nuclear weapons were used to prevent, resolve or deter these conflicts.



Premise #5: Deterrence works because there has been no nuclear war.

Reality check: Just because there was no war between the Soviet Union and the Atlantic Treaty powers since 1945, while both sides possessed nuclear weapons, does not mean the second was the cause of the first. Such a war would arguably be contrary to the interests of potential adversaries. And some scholars assert that Japan’s surrender was not due to the atomic bombings but came about because of its invasion by the Soviets two days later. So neither the threat nor use of nuclear weapons brought peace.



Premise #6: We “need” nuclear weapons for our national security to frighten off the enemy.

Reality check: Nuclear weapons are completely useless against an enemy that is both homicidal and suicidal such as terrorist groups. Plus, the more countries that possess nuclear weapons, the more likely it becomes that a nuclear state, or a non-state actor, will use them. This premise relies on fear to create a false sense of security.



Premise #7: Too many countries already have nuclear weapons, therefore no one will give them up.

Reality check: The UN nuclear weapons ban demonstrates that nuclear disarmament is a question of moral willingness. It is not a military or strategic requirement that prevents disarmament but a psychological delusion. South Africa voluntarily gave up its nuclear weapons. This can happen again.



Premise #8: Deterrence works because enemies know that if they provoked a nuclear attack that destroyed their major cities, their defeat would be assured.

Reality check: Violence against cities and civilians has been shown not to be militarily decisive. This is one reason why some military leaders have declared nuclear weapons militarily useless and that wars cannot be won using nuclear weapons.



Premise #9: We must keep refurbishing nuclear weapons to have a credible deterrent.

Reality check: If nuclear weapons are a deterrent, why are 2,000 more “credible” than 10? There is no need to obliterate each other, and the world, 100 times over. “Modernization” serves the financial needs of defense contractors not national security.



Premise #10: If the Russians are developing “undetectable” nuclear weapons, the US must have parity or even superiority, to prevent nuclear war.

Reality check: Would an “undetectable” Russian weapon be used in a “surprise attack?” If so, deterrence has failed. If it is used in retaliation, then the US has already attacked and deterrence has failed. No new weapons are needed given both countries can already obliterate each other.



Premise #11: Nations with effective Missile Defense Systems (MDS) are protected from attacks using nuclear-tipped missiles. Hence, such systems deter potential attackers.

Reality check: No Missile Defense System can be 100% effective; hence reliance on such systems is misguided as even if only a few missiles in a mass attack penetrate the MDS, mass destruction is inevitable. Furthermore, nations which think that they have an effective defense system would be more likely to execute a 'first strike' using nuclear weapons, and thereby would not be deterred. As in Premise 9, MDS systems only serve the financial needs of defense contractors, not national security.



Premise #12: Despite the thousands of nuclear weapons still in existence, there has been no nuclear war. Deterrence has worked.

Reality check: This outcome is more a result of luck than design. There have been several close calls, most famously on September 26, 1983, when the decision of one Russian soldier, Stanislav Petrov, to interpret an apparent nuclear attack as a systems error, saved the world from nuclear annihilation. We cannot afford to have our survival depend on the good judgement of one individual.

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