

# US Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence

## Realist versus Utopian Thinking<sup>©</sup>

Dr. Keith B. Payne

A debate over the future of the US nuclear arsenal is at a pivotal moment. The Obama administration has proposed to Congress a budget that calls for modernization of the US “nuclear triad” of missiles, submarines, and bombers. This proposal is notable because presidential administrations and Congress have largely neglected US nuclear forces for over two decades; consequently, each part of the triad has aged or is aging rapidly, and according to *National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (2008), “The United States does not have the ability to produce new nuclear weapons.”<sup>1</sup>

The Congressional Budget Office notes that the Department of Defense will spend \$15.4 billion on nuclear-weapons modernization in 2015—less than 3 percent of the department’s budget—and only slightly more (\$15.9 billion) in fiscal year 2016. If the fledgling programs now requested are killed or further delayed, the US nuclear arsenal—already reduced by 80 percent since the end of the Cold War—will be further disarmed by neglect as the aging missiles, submarines, and bombers reach the end of their scheduled and extended service lives.<sup>2</sup>

The congressional defense budget hearings now under way reveal the fragility of the multiyear US nuclear modernization plan. For example, Frank Kendall, undersecretary of defense for acquisition, technology, and logistics, reported to the Senate that under current defense budget projections, the United States will have “affordability problems” in producing the replacement for the existing submarine element of the nuclear triad.<sup>3</sup>

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The administration's proposed budget and modernization plan have met with strong opposition, particularly from nuclear utopians, who insist that the United States should either delay or skip triad modernization, make further deep reductions in the remaining US nuclear arsenal, or even eliminate it altogether. In contrast, nuclear realists believe that, given the rapid aging of the US triad, the increasing belligerence of Russia and China, and their buildup of nuclear forces, prudence now demands that the United States update its nuclear arsenal and pause from further reductions below those already scheduled in the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).

The fissure between nuclear utopians and nuclear realists has at various times been attributed to greater and lesser concern about nuclear war, respectively, or greater or lesser intellectual maturity.<sup>4</sup> One eccentric explanation even presents the fundamental difference in Freudian terms (i.e., “acute missile envy”).<sup>5</sup> Differences in academic credentials, the desire to prevent nuclear war, or emotional maturity do not divide nuclear utopians and nuclear realists, however. The distinction separating these rival lines of thought is their fundamentally different underlying understandings of international relations and the functioning of nuclear deterrence.

Utopians tend to believe that international cooperation, norms, and institutions—not nuclear deterrence—have prevented nuclear war and can do so in the future. As Rose Gottemoeller, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, claimed in a recent speech, “We have been spared that fate because we created an intricate and essential system of treaties, laws and agreements.”<sup>6</sup> It is said that with sufficient political will, action, vision, and faith, world leaders can agree to renounce nuclear weapons via the creation of international legal structures and institutions that will provide peaceful approaches to conflict resolution as an alternative to nuclear arms and deterrence.<sup>7</sup>

Nuclear realists, however, point out that in severe security crises across all time, international cooperative norms and legal structures have been superseded by the imperative of the hour. Hence, in 1914 Germany justified its violation of Belgium's neutrality as necessary in defense of its national security, and in 1940 Great Britain violated Norway's neutrality to counter the mounting German threat. Furthermore, in 1940 Britain attacked the French naval base at Mers-el-Kébir on the coast of then-French Algeria, killing almost 1,300 French servicemen. Britain took this action against its erstwhile ally for fear that Germany otherwise would take the French ships and tip the naval balance in its favor. The respective German and British justifications for these military actions are remarkably similar—that is, the highest calling of national security demanded them.

These and countless similar examples reflect the powerful international norm of *raison d'État* (the primacy of state interest over opinions regarding cooperation, morality, or international law). Realists do not celebrate this norm but recognize its existence and potency. The perceived requirements of national security ultimately trump the constraining effect of international opinion, norms, and law and create an essentially anarchic “self-help” security environment.<sup>8</sup> The great ancient Greek historian Thucydides put it starkly in the Melian Dialogue: “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”<sup>9</sup> The frequent demonstration of the reality of this observation in international relations, not folly or malevolence, leads many states

to seek nuclear capabilities if they are able or to rely on the nuclear capabilities of a powerful ally.

Utopians claim that the imperative of national security underlying the felt need for nuclear protection can be superseded by the rise of an alternative countervailing norm and international institutions that buttress global collective security, peaceful conflict resolution, and nuclear disarmament. As noted, this unprecedented global norm would, they say, be established via international political will, leadership, and faith.<sup>10</sup> Leaders so equipped and inspired could seek to overcome the age-old international context described by Thucydides with global legal institutions and mutual trust rather than insecurity and mistrust.

It is not an overstatement, however, to observe that the global establishment of a powerful, effective cooperative norm and corresponding international institutions that can be trusted to control aggression and provide protection globally would represent an unprecedented reordering of the international system. Once such a reordering is in place, utopians are correct in saying that it could create the international security context necessary for nuclear disarmament. History, however, gives no indication of its possibility, and in its absence Thucydides and the norm of *raison d'État* will continue to prevail. As the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States (Perry-Schlesinger Commission) recognized, "The conditions that might make possible the global elimination of nuclear weapons are not present today and their creation would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order."<sup>11</sup>

Realists in this regard are from Missouri, the "show me" state, and ask utopians to explain how, why, and when a powerful new cooperative international norm with corresponding international institutions will become a reality. Realists point to the unhappy history of the unmet claims and dashed hopes of the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact (intended to prevent offensive war by global legal agreement), the League of Nations, and the United Nations. To be sure, the future does not have to be bound by the past, but before moving further toward nuclear disarmament, realists want to see some clear evidence of the emerging transformation of the global order—not just the claim that it can occur if all key leaders are so willing, faithful, and visionary and can "embrace a politics of impossibility."<sup>12</sup> As the old English proverb says, "If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride."

But has not everything changed in the twenty-first century? Has not the end of the Cold War ushered in a new global commitment to cooperation, the rule of law globally, and benign conflict resolution? The unarguable answer is no. Russian military actions against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014 (the latter in direct violation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum signed by Russia, Great Britain, and the United States) are sufficient empirical evidence to demonstrate that Thucydides' stark description of reality is alive and well. China's expansionist claims and military pressure against its neighbors in the East and South China Seas teach the same lesson.

Why is this reality significant in the consideration of nuclear weapons? Because in the absence of reliably overturning the powerful norm of *raison d'État* and Thucydides' explanation of international relations, states with the capability and felt need will continue to demand nuclear capabilities for their own protection and,

in some cases, to provide cover for their expansionist plans. To wit, if Ukraine had retained nuclear weapons, would it now fear for its survival at the hands of Russian aggression? Former Ukrainian defense minister Valeriy Heletey and members of the Ukrainian parliament have made this point explicitly, lamenting Ukraine's transfer of its nuclear forces to Russia in return for now-broken security promises of the Budapest Memorandum.<sup>13</sup>

This lesson cannot have been lost on other leaders considering the value of nuclear weapons. Nor is it a coincidence that US allies in Central Europe and Asia are becoming ever more explicit about their need for US nuclear assurances under the US extended nuclear deterrent (i.e., the nuclear umbrella). They see no new emerging, powerful global collective security regime or cooperative norms that will preserve their security; thus, they understandably seek the assurance of power, including nuclear power. The Polish Foreign Ministry observed in a recent press release that “the current situation reaffirms the importance of NATO's nuclear deterrence policy.”<sup>14</sup> This reality stands in stark contrast to utopian claims that powerful new global norms and international institutions will reorder the international system, overturn Thucydides, and allow individual states to dispense with nuclear weapons or the nuclear protection of a powerful ally. As the Socialist French president Francois Hollande has said, “The international context does not allow for any weakness. . . . The era of nuclear deterrence is therefore not over. . . . In a dangerous world—and it is dangerous—France does not want to let down its guard. . . . The possibility of future state conflicts concerning us directly or indirectly cannot be excluded.”<sup>15</sup> There could be no clearer expression of Thucydides' description of international relations and its contemporary implications for nuclear weapons.

Opponents of the administration's plan to modernize the US triad now double down on the utopian narrative by insisting that the United States instead lead the way in establishing the new global norm by showing that Washington no longer relies on nuclear weapons and does not seek new ones. Washington cannot expect others to forgo nuclear weapons if it retains them, they say, and thus it must lead in creation of the new norm against nuclear weapons by providing an example to the world. For instance, “by unilaterally reducing its arsenal to a total of 1,000 warheads, the United States would encourage Russia to similarly reduce its nuclear forces without waiting for arms control negotiations.”<sup>16</sup> A good US example supposedly can help “induce parallel” behavior in others.<sup>17</sup> If, however, the United States attributes continuing value to nuclear weapons by maintaining its arsenal, “other countries will be more inclined to seek” them.<sup>18</sup>

Nuclear realists respond, however, that the United States already has reduced its nuclear forces deeply over the last 25 years. America cut its tactical nuclear weapons from a few thousand in 1991 to a “few hundred” today.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, US-deployed strategic nuclear weapons have been cut from an estimated 9,000 in 1992 to roughly 1,600 accountable warheads today, with still more reductions planned under the New START Treaty.<sup>20</sup> The United States has even decided to be highly revealing of its nuclear capabilities to encourage others to do so, with no apparent effect on Russia, China, or North Korea.<sup>21</sup> America has adhered fully to the reductions and restrictions of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty—the “centerpiece of arms control”—but the Russians now are in open violation. As former undersec-

retary of state Robert Joseph stated recently, decades of deep US reductions “appear to have had no moderating effect on Russian, Chinese or North Korean nuclear programs. Neither have U.S. reductions led to any effective strengthening of international nonproliferation efforts.”<sup>22</sup> Utopians want the United States to lead the world toward nuclear disarmament by its good example, but no one is following.

The basic reason, realists point out, is that foreign leaders make decisions about nuclear weaponry based largely on their countries’ strategic needs, *raison d’État*, not in deference to America’s penchant for nuclear disarmament or some sense of global fairness. A close review of India by S. Paul Kapur, for example, concluded that “Indian leaders do not seek to emulate US nuclear behavior; they formulate policy based primarily on their assessment of the security threats facing India.”<sup>23</sup> The same self-interested calculation is true for other nuclear and aspiring nuclear states.

Nations that are a security concern to the United States seek nuclear weapons to intimidate their neighbors (including US allies), to counter US conventional forces, and to gain a free hand to press their regional military ambitions. They see nuclear weapons as their trump cards and do not follow the US lead in nuclear disarmament. A bipartisan expert working group at the Center for Strategic and International Studies concluded accordingly that “U.S. nuclear reductions have no impact on the calculus of Iran and North Korea.”<sup>24</sup>

Nuclear realists also note that many allies have given up the nuclear option because America provides a “nuclear umbrella” for their protection. The United States reportedly has now offered this nuclear umbrella to Middle Eastern states that otherwise could go nuclear for fear of a prospective Iranian nuclear bomb.<sup>25</sup> Japanese and South Koreans have said that if the US nuclear umbrella loses credibility, they will be compelled to find security alternatives, including reconsideration of nuclear capabilities. In short, further US nuclear reductions may inspire nuclear proliferation—not prevent it as claimed by critics of US nuclear modernization.

Nuclear utopians and nuclear realists simply perceive international relations differently, with corresponding great effect on their views of nuclear deterrence and weapons. Seeing an orderly system that functions predictably and increasingly amicably, utopians make two confident predictions as the basis for further deep US nuclear reductions. The first is that US deterrence will work reliably even with a relatively small nuclear arsenal or nuclear zero. Specifically, they offer confident claims that a specific number or level of US nuclear weapons will be adequate for America’s deterrence goals. That number often is associated with the capability deemed adequate to threaten an opponent’s societal infrastructure with destruction—a relatively small number of nuclear weapons: “From a practical perspective, several second-strike nuclear weapons are more than enough to keep the most aggressive adversary at bay.”<sup>26</sup> Or, “deterrence today would remain stable even if retaliation against only ten cities were assured.”<sup>27</sup> And, “no current or conceivable future threat requires the United States to maintain more than a few hundred survivable warheads.”<sup>28</sup> Such predictions abound in the public debate. They are offered with great certainty by those recommending deep US nuclear force reductions, presumably because they feel the need to assure us that deterrence will not be degraded by the deep nuclear force reductions they recommend.

Yet, such predictions simply assume that a specific number of weapons or specific type of threat will produce the desired deterrent effect on the premise that all rational opponents *should be deterred by such a threat*. The capability for posing a threat, though, does not equate to a predictable deterrent effect—or indeed any deterrent effect. In truth, no one, however credentialed, can make such promises with any credibility because the functioning of deterrence is shaped by many factors—some known and others opaque, including enormous variations in leadership perceptions and calculations. Only an omniscient observer could claim to know that a specific number of nuclear weapons will be adequate for deterrence, now or in the future. As a recent National Academy of Sciences study noted in this regard,

Finally, models of human beings and their individual and collective behaviors must necessarily include a large amount of inherent uncertainty. This uncertainty is not a flaw of the model and cannot be designed out of the model. Human behavior is dynamic and adaptive over time, and it is impossible at the moment (and into the foreseeable future) to make exact predictions about that behavior.<sup>29</sup>

In short, deterrence is a human construct based on the functioning of human perceptions and calculations that are affected by multiple factors beyond confident prediction. Its functioning remains unpredictable and fallible, and confident claims about the deterrent effect of “several,” “10,” or a “few hundred” weapons reflect a utopian pretense of omniscience.

The second typical prediction is that Russia and China will pose no severe military threats to the United States and its allies and that their differences with the United States will be resolved without reference to nuclear capabilities. For example, the 2012 report by the Global Zero Commission claimed that “the risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future.”<sup>30</sup>

Nuclear realists have no confidence in such predictions, which again can come only from the utopian pretense of omniscience. Prior to the nuclear age, they point out, great powers periodically came into intense conflict, and deterrence relying on conventional forces failed to prevent catastrophic wars. The Concert of Europe failed to stop the descent into World War I, and the League of Nations collapsed during the lead-up to World War II. Since 1945, however, a powerful US nuclear arsenal appears to have had a decisive effect in deterring the outbreak of World War III and in containing regional crises and conflicts. Yet, nuclear utopians want to reduce this arsenal deeply or eliminate it.

Instead of the utopians' vision of an orderly, predictable, and benign world order, realists see international relations as fluid, often dangerous, and unpredictable, as they have been for millennia and as described by Thucydides. Realists point to the frequent history of international relations worsening rapidly and surprisingly; they see no indication of an emerging and amicable new world order. The current unexpected Russian aggression in Europe is a cold reminder of this reality. In January prominent Russian journalist Alexander Golts warned that “the West had forgotten how it had used nuclear deterrence to coexist with the Soviet Union. Now it will have to open up that playbook once more.”<sup>31</sup>

In truth, Thucydides and *raison d'État* rein over international relations, and sovereign power remains the ultimate currency in a self-help international system with a near-global lack of security and trust. Deterrence, including nuclear deterrence, correspondingly remains important—but it is both fallible and unpredictable. The utopian-proffered solution of nuclear disarmament must await the fundamental reordering of international relations—the hope for which seems remarkably utopian. What can be done, given this distressing situation?

The realist response is clear but not fully satisfactory because realism offers no infallible, complete solution to conflict in the international system and the related question of deterrence and its nuclear requirements: deterrence must be made as effective as possible to prevent war and the escalation of hostilities. This goal likely requires (1) as complete an understanding as is possible of opponents' perceptions and values so as to tailor US deterrence strategies appropriately to the opponent and deterrent goal and (2) a broad spectrum of flexible and resilient US conventional and nuclear capabilities to help the United States deter as effectively as possible across a broad spectrum of contingencies and potential opponents with varying goals, values, perceptions, and modes of decision making. The number of US weapons and platforms is one, but only one, potentially important measure of a flexible and resilient force structure.<sup>32</sup> Equally important, the potential for deterrence failure must be recognized via the provision of indirect and direct US defensive capabilities. Defenses cannot ensure the safety of all people in all scenarios, to be sure—but they could help save lives and mitigate destruction in many. It must be acknowledged that this combination of deterrence and defensive measures can neither fully eliminate the risk of war nor ensure the safety of all—that too would be a utopian expectation. But only the pretense of a more credible solution and safety resides in the utopian expectation of a cooperative new world order that ushers in nuclear disarmament—or in vapid promises that a small, narrow set of US strategic capabilities surely will deter reliably now and in the future.

In summary, contemporary evidence and all of history argues against the utopians' predictable, amicable world in which a potent cooperative norm and international law have supplanted *raison d'État* and Thucydides' description of international relations. Decisions made now that would cause further erosion of the US nuclear arsenal would take decades to reverse, create fear among key allies, and likely inspire foes to challenge a United States that appears less able to deter in the hard times ahead. These are the stakes in the current debate. 🌐

## Notes

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**Dr. Keith B. Payne**

Dr. Payne (AB, University of California–Berkeley; PhD, University of Southern California) is professor and head of the Graduate Department of Defense and Strategic Studies, Missouri State University (Washington Campus). He is also president and cofounder of the National Institute for Public Policy, a nonprofit research center located in Fairfax, Virginia. Dr. Payne served in the Department of Defense as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for forces policy. In 2003 he received the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service; in 2005, the Vicennial Medal for his many years of graduate teaching at Georgetown University; and in 2013, the Chief Scientist’s Medal for Excellence, Global Strike Command. He is the author or coauthor of over 30 books and monographs as well as 150 published articles, including the 2009 report of the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States (Perry-Schlesinger Commission).

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