

Policy Forum 09-066: Extended Deterrence: Cutting Edge of the Debate on Nuclear Policy

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 09-066: Extended Deterrence: Cutting Edge of the Debate on Nuclear Policy", NAPSNet Policy Forum, August 13, 2009, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/extended-deterrence-cutting-edge-of-the-debate-on-nuclear-policy/>

Extended Deterrence: Cutting Edge of the Debate on Nuclear Policy

Policy Forum Online 09-066A: August 13th, 2009

By Barry M. Blechman

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I. Introduction

Barry M. Blechman, co-founder of the Henry L. Stimson Center and a Stimson Distinguished Fellow, writes, "the contrast between murmurings of defense officials in private meetings and their horror at the thought of public debate about nuclear deployments makes clear that extended deterrence is a

concept that served a vital purpose during the Cold War, but whose time has come - and gone."

II. Article by Barry M. Blechman

- "Extended Deterrence: Cutting Edge of the Debate on Nuclear Policy"

By Barry M. Blechman

As the Obama Administration contemplates the US nuclear posture, it will have to come to terms with an old issue in new settings. Back in the Cold War, the US "extended" its nuclear deterrent to allies in Europe and Asia to help them feel more secure from threats posed by the Soviet Union and to persuade them that they did not have to develop nuclear weapons of their own. By "extending" its deterrent, the US promised it would come to the defense of those nations - even if the conflict escalated to an all-out nuclear exchange between the two superpowers. Quite a commitment: For decades, US Presidents stated they would defend Western Europe and selected nations in Asia, despite the immeasurable cost of an all-out nuclear war.

The Cold War, of course, has long ended and the Soviet Union no longer exists. Extended deterrence lives on, however, and some would like to see America's willingness to risk the lives of millions of its citizens extended even farther. Both the United States and its allies face difficult decisions if the policy is to be kept alive.

In Europe, US nuclear commitments were made credible during the Cold War by the stationing of thousands of US nuclear weapons on the continent. Although only a few hundred US nuclear weapons remain in Europe, NATO's new "strategic concept" may require that difficult decisions be made about them. Maintaining a credible extended deterrent in Europe requires spending money to modernize storage facilities, ensuring that the weapons themselves remain safe and reliable, and replacing the aircraft that had been planned to deliver them with more modern fighters with special electronics required for nuclear attack capabilities.

Some of the newer NATO members, especially those who previously were occupied by Soviet forces, worry about a resurgent nationalist Russia which, itself, has thousands of short-range nuclear weapons on its European territory, and argue that the weapons and the policy should be retained to deter Russian nuclear-use in the event of conflict. The strong possibility that Iran will soon have nuclear weapons adds another motivation as Turkey, a NATO member with US nuclear weapons on its soil, sees their presence as deterring any future Iranian aggressiveness.

The problem is that most of the NATO allies would hate to see the issue debated in their parliaments, as might result from the new "strategic concept," or would certainly result if appropriations were requested for nuclear-related facilities or aircraft. European publics are generally strongly anti-nuclear, so while the officials of defense and foreign ministries may wish to retain the policy, their political masters are desperate to avoid any action that might renew public debate on nuclear weapons and adversely affect elections for sitting governments.

In Asia, the US deployed nuclear weapons in South Korea and Okinawa for many years, but now keeps them only on its own territories in the Pacific. The Japanese have been the most outspoken about the need to maintain the credibility of "extended deterrence," fearing not only a resurgent Russia but China's growing nuclear arsenal. Japanese officials are concerned that if the US negotiates too-deep mutual reductions in US and Russian nuclear stocks, it would encourage China to build even more nuclear weapons, seeking parity with the superpowers. Japan is also concerned about the fledgling North Korean nuclear capability.

Japanese diplomats assert that the old Tomahawk nuclear-armed submarine missiles the US has kept

in storage for more than fifteen years make "extended deterrence" more credible as, theoretically, they could be deployed to the region in a crisis. But the weapons aren't just kept in a warehouse - submarine crews have to be trained annually to retain their nuclear certifications - costing US taxpayers tens of millions of dollars. There are cheaper ways to reassure Japan's officials. For example, when the US withdrew missiles from Turkey as part of the deal that ended the Cuban missile crisis, the Turks expressed concerns about the credibility of the US deterrent. To reassure them, a US ballistic missile submarine paid a port visit to Izmir. But given political considerations, no Japanese official would advocate such port visits in place of the costly Tomahawks.

As the US and Russia draw down their nuclear stocks, "extended deterrence" in Asia could become a major issue in US-Japanese relations.

Finally, in the Middle East, some have suggested that the best way to prevent a nuclear proliferation cascade in response to Iran's nuclear program is for the US to "extend deterrence" to Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states that feel threatened by Iran. Leaving aside the question of whether or not the leaders of these nations would care to be so closely and publicly allied with the US, should the American people be willing to put their lives on the line to defend societies whose values and ideals seem so different than our own?

If nothing else, the contrast between murmurings of defense officials in private meetings and their horror at the thought of public debate about nuclear deployments makes clear that extended deterrence is a concept that served a vital purpose during the Cold War, but whose time has come - and gone. Far better to pursue the only true remedy for nuclear dangers, Ronald Reagan's solution: The phased elimination of nuclear weapons from all nations combined with the deployment of effective defenses.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)

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