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## On ‘Campaigning’ for Nuclear Deterrence

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In his famous 1964 film *Dr Strangelove*, Stanley Kubrick used farce to try to make sense of the dilemmas of the nuclear era. Film history buffs will recall the film’s subtitle: *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Kubrick’s purpose was in part to illuminate the absurdity of loving the instrument of humankind’s possible annihilation. There is a natural public yearning to be free of the long shadow cast by nuclear weapons. But that is much easier said than done. So far, at least, it has proven impossible to create the conditions that would make those protected by nuclear deterrents feel safer disarmed than armed. So long as nuclear weapons remain, there will be a need to ensure that the taboo on their use, now seven decades old, also remains. This implies a continuing role for nuclear deterrence, among other things. Those concerned with nuclear dangers face a true moral dilemma with the twin obligations to work to remove the long shadow and to work to ensure that deterrence is effective for the problems for which it is relevant so long as nuclear weapons remain.<sup>1</sup>

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For politicians and policymakers, this is challenging terrain. It is difficult to know how to orient oneself within this political minefield. Lawrence Freedman, in writing about deterrence, has captured the essence of the challenge as follows:

A doctrine that is so associated with continuity and the status quo, which occupies a middle ground between appeasement and aggression, celebrates caution above all else, and for that property alone is beloved by officials and diplomats, was never likely to inspire a popular following. Campaigners might march behind banners demanding peace and disarmament, the media might get excited by talk of war and conflict, but successful deterrence, marked by nothing much happening, is unlikely to get the pulse racing. It has no natural political constituency.<sup>2</sup>

Confronted with the need to engage politically and publicly on these issues, many politicians and policymakers shy away. The disincentives are numerous. The subject matter is inherently complex and arcane. The learning curve is steep. There is no ‘natural political constituency’ for deterrence to be mobilised. In contrast, the opponents of nuclear deterrence stand by, ready to deploy exquisitely honed arguments and to mobilise their ample constituency.

But silence is counterproductive. It undermines the political foundations of existing policies, calling into question the viability of very long-term projects such as nuclear modernisation cycles spanning decades. It impedes the testing of new thinking against new circumstances. It leaves the attentive public, and their elected representatives, exposed to only one side of the issues. It assumes that the major policy debates have been ‘won’ and that policies will not be reversed. It fuels the perception of the attentive public that the advocates of deterrence do not have the courage of their convictions—and thus must not believe the policies they choose not to defend. And it leaves the public space on these matters entirely to those with competing agendas. This now includes not just disarmament campaigners but also Russia and China, whose ‘information confrontation’ strategies aggressively use all of the means available to them to shape the narratives, perceptions and judgements of targeted publics and elites.

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 25.

The failure to build and maintain a constituency for nuclear deterrence may have even more troubling implications. Not all nuclear-armed states require the consent of the governed to maintain their nuclear deterrents. If the nuclear-armed democracies lose their political will to maintain effective nuclear deterrence so long as nuclear weapons remain, the nuclear-armed authoritarian states stand to gain. The failures of political leaders in the democracies of the 1930s to maintain constituencies for (pre-nuclear) deterrence contributed significantly to the formation of the belief in Berlin and Tokyo that the democracies lacked the resolve to defend their interest. Of course, this proved to be a catastrophic misjudgement, as the democracies proved willing to defend themselves. But to do so, they paid a price they might well have avoided had they been mindful of the messages of weakness they sent.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, for both domestic and international political reasons, politicians and policymakers should not give in to the impulse to shy away.<sup>4</sup> How then should they navigate this difficult terrain? How should they think about the task of advocating for nuclear deterrence without being dismissed as the farcical Dr Strangelove? My experience as a one-time official involved at a senior level in the making of US nuclear deterrence policy and subsequently as the author of a book making the case for nuclear weapons points to the following key lessons.<sup>5</sup>

## Five Lessons

First, the interested public, like the interested politician, is fundamentally ambivalent about nuclear deterrence. It has not learned to love the bomb and is worried about life with the bomb—and also about what life without it might mean. The citizens with whom I interact would generally like to be free of nuclear danger, but they do not want to be free of nuclear deterrence prematurely. Public opinion polling bears out these

3 This historical analogy is explored more fully in Brad Roberts, 'Nuclear Ethics and the Ban Treaty', in *Nuclear Disarmament: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Brad Nikolavik Steen and Olav Njolstad (Oslo: Norwegian Nobel Institute, 2019).

4 The debate about how much public discussion of nuclear deterrence policy to encourage stretches back decades. See Harold Brown, 'Domestic Consensus and Nuclear Deterrence', in *Defence and Consensus: The Domestic Aspects of Western Security, Part II*, Adelphi Paper No. 183 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1983), 22–27; Richard K. Betts, 'Nuclear Weapons', in *The Making of America's Soviet Policy*, ed. Joseph S. Nye (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 125–26.

5 Brad Roberts, *The Case for US Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), doi.org/10.1515/9780804797153.

observations. Asked whether they support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), respondents are heavily in favour.<sup>6</sup> Asked whether they support unilateral disarmament, respondents are heavily opposed.<sup>7</sup> This ambivalence is deep-seated and stretches back to the 1950s.<sup>8</sup>

This implies that the public interest that can be engaged by advocates of nuclear deterrence is the interest in being better informed. It is not an interest in being recruited to join the nuclear deterrence constituency. In my experience, an ambivalent public seeks opportunities to learn about nuclear deterrence primarily because it is curious about the changing security environment and changing thinking within government about how to respond and shape that environment. The interested public engages on these issues to gain more insight and not to change its mind. Advocates of nuclear deterrence should set their objectives and expectations accordingly.

Second, there are many stakeholders in nuclear deterrence policy and the political discourse is well served by engaging broadly with them. These include the general public, general public policy experts in universities and think tanks, nuclear policy experts, nuclear policy advocacy groups and journalists. Additionally, within the US Government, there are numerous constituencies: policymakers, policy implementers, budget makers, congressional authorisers and appropriators, and their staffs. Within the US military, there are still others with equities on these topics: the Joint Staff, US Strategic Command, the geographic combatant commands with nuclear-relevant threats in their areas of responsibility and the services charged with providing deterrent forces. From a US perspective, there are also important stakeholders in the capitals of allied countries (and in their embassies in Washington, DC), both inside and outside government. Further, many other countries not allied with the US take a strong interest in disarmament diplomacy and in actions by the US and powerful states that affect global nuclear risk.

6 See the analysis on polling in Tanya Ogilvie-White's chapter in this volume.

7 Ernie Regehr, 'Nuclear Disarmament or Nuclear Ambivalence?', survey conducted by the Simons Foundation and the Angus Reid Strategies Corporation, 2007, [ploughshares.ca/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/brf074.pdf](http://ploughshares.ca/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/brf074.pdf).

8 David S. Yost, 'The Delegitimization of Nuclear Deterrence', *Armed Forces and Society* 16(4), 1990, 487–508, doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9001600401.

This implies the need for a practice of nuclear deterrence advocacy that reaches well beyond the interested public and thus a need to tailor the message to the audience, based on its level of expertise and particular equities. There is some risk of going beyond tailoring to changing the message to suit the interests of different audiences—something that quickly strips away the credibility of the messenger. This second lesson also implies that nuclear deterrence advocacy must be sustained on a nearly continuous basis. After all, regular staff turnover is common to all these institutions.

Third, to tell a good story to these various stakeholders, it is obviously essential to have a good story. Government cannot explain and defend its thinking about nuclear weapons if it has not done any thinking. Having done its homework, it must then be transparent about both the results and the thinking behind the policies.

What makes a story good? I have watched many audiences react badly to official descriptions of nuclear policy that are entirely self-referential. That is, they address only nuclear threats, nuclear deterrence strategy and nuclear weapons. Few stakeholders see the world in such simple terms. Most bring context of some kind, as must the advocates of nuclear deterrence. A good story begins at the beginning: in this case, with a view of that moral dilemma as embedded in a view of the security environment. A good story goes on to explain the place of nuclear deterrence in broader defence and deterrence strategy. It should also include a vision of how to finally escape the dilemmas of nuclear deterrence, however remote that possibility may seem, as well as a well-reasoned case for what steps can and cannot be taken safely to reduce nuclear dangers. A good story refrains from jargon, hyperbole and rhetorical attacks on contrary views.

This implies that government needs the time and means to get its thinking together on these topics. In the US, this has been done through the reviews of nuclear posture and policy conducted by each new presidential administration since 1994. The resulting reports are intended to inform both the executive-legislative discussion of specific policies and programs and the broader public discourse. They have served these purposes well. But to have an enduring impact, they must be seen as the starting point of a continuing public dialogue, not the last word.

This also implies that government needs the requisite expertise—technical, military and political. US Nuclear Posture Reviews (NPRs) draw on the policy expertise of the functional and regional bureaus in the Office of the Secretary of Defense; the military expertise of the Joint Staff, armed services and combatant commands; the technical expertise of the Department of Energy; the diplomatic expertise of the Department of State; the specialised knowledge of the intelligence community; the perspectives of US allies; and the knowledge and advocacy of non-governmental experts. The cast of stakeholders is large, but its actual expertise is quite thin. The US Government's overall capacity for nuclear policy development is heavily constrained by the loss of focus on nuclear deterrence in the two decades after the Cold War and the atrophy of the institutions and investments that underwrote US strategic thought in the first few decades of the nuclear era.

Fourth, expect dissent. As argued above, the public space is contested. The disarmament 'campaigners' have effectively mobilised their 'natural public constituency'. But let's reject their claim that there are two mutually opposed camps of disarmers and deterrers. The disarmament community is in fact many sub-communities (as is the deterrence community). Some see disarmament as a near-term goal, while others see it as a very long-term goal. To be sure, some reject outright the historical, military and moral claims of the nuclear deterrence community and seek only to vanquish a despised political foe. But many others embrace the moral dilemma described in the opening of this essay. I have also found a third group: those who think they disagree with nuclear deterrence policy but do not, in fact, once they understand it.

This implies a value in engaging forthrightly with these different communities but with expectations matched to each. With those who embrace the moral dilemma, expect some progress in building bridges where interests converge (e.g. on measures to reduce and, where possible, eliminate nuclear dangers and risks). With those who do not, expect to change no minds. With those who think they disagree but may not, minds might be changed.

Fifth, the moral debate about nuclear weapons is inescapable and thus should be joined forthrightly. In my experience, the interested public expects and wants engagement on moral issues in addition to military and political ones. The moral case against nuclear weapons is made with passion and conviction. In contrast, the moral case for nuclear weapons is rarely

if ever made. For the interested public, this raises important questions about the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence policy. One case is far easier to make than the other. The moral case against nuclear weapons is built on a single powerful image: the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the suffering of the survivors of the bombing. The moral case for nuclear weapons is built on a montage of historical experience, military strategy and political theory. That is, the moral case involves judgements about the causes of war and peace, the requirements of operational and strategic success in war and opportunities to affect an adversary's decision calculus.

This is a challenge for which government is not well equipped. Its ranks are not filled with skilled moral philosophers. But this does not relieve the advocates of nuclear deterrence of the moral obligation to make their case. This implies a more ample discourse about the role of nuclear deterrence in US grand strategy than has so far been developed in periodic NPRs. The moral case for nuclear deterrence begins with the responsibility to protect. The moral case for extended deterrence begins with recognition of the fact that the responsibility to protect does not stop at national borders.<sup>9</sup>

## Campaigning for Nuclear Deterrence

This catalogue of lessons attests to the breadth and depth of the necessary communication by the policymaker to stakeholders. Much more than a single document or speech is needed. In the US, the reports of the NPR are the starting point for the needed public discourse, not the last word. This suggests that it is useful to borrow from the advocates of disarmament the notion of campaigning.

Disarmament campaigning has been under way for decades. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, founded in 1957 and based in the UK, helped launch the broader international Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. Campaigning for disarmament involves sustained advocacy by civil society actors, sometimes in partnership with like-minded international organisations and governments, to establish new norms and legal mechanisms and to impact national decision-making for disarmament purposes by states possessing nuclear weapons or dependent

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9 Points of reference include Michael Quinlan, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons: Principles, Problems, and Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199563944.001.0001. See also Roberts, 'Nuclear Ethics and the Ban Treaty'.

on nuclear protection by another.<sup>10</sup> As John Borrie of the UN Institute for Disarmament Research has argued, campaigning is also about ‘changing the discourse—the manner in which things are talked about, including which questions are asked and answered’.<sup>11</sup> This campaign has enjoyed significant success in working with like-minded states to create and bring into force the TPNW. Its impact earned it a Nobel Peace Prize in 2017.

Nuclear deterrence campaigning would entail some of the same approaches: sustained advocacy in critical national capitals and media markets, partnerships with stakeholder institutions, the defence of existing norms and mechanisms and efforts to change the discourse by asking the right questions—all aimed at sustaining the political foundations for nuclear deterrence in states possessing nuclear weapons or dependent on nuclear protection by another. As Freedman’s analysis suggests, prizes will not be handed out and there is no ‘natural constituency’ to mobilise for a parade. But public service often does not generate public acclaim.

Inherent to the notion of a campaign is acceptance that the objective is long term. In this case, the debate about the utility and morality of nuclear weapons is never likely to be settled. So long as nuclear weapons remain, these matters will remain in contention.

Given the passions that attach to nuclear policy debates, it is hardly surprising that it has been tainted by the broader decline of public debate in the US. Rather than stick to the issues in a manner that informs public discourse about the substance of the matters in dispute, policy advocates often resort to *ad hominem* attacks, apparently with the belief that demonising the other side in the public policy debate will persuade an undecided public. This has plagued both ‘sides’ in the nuclear debate. There is no better example of this malady than a prominent 2020 book on nuclear deterrence policy in which the authors attack the people who make policy judgements with which they disagree. They blame a faceless ‘nuclear bureaucracy’ whose views are ‘so entrenched’ that its core ideas are ‘never questioned’. They cynically impute a motive for self-enrichment with the argument that this faceless bureaucracy ‘if left to itself ... will keep the contracts and the money flowing’. They chastise the military for ‘a long

10 Rebecca Johnson, ‘Arms Control and Disarmament Diplomacy’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199588862.013.0033.

11 John Borrie, ‘Changing the Discourse on Nuclear Weapons: What it Means and Why it’s Important’, accessed online 6 June 2018 (site discontinued).



tradition of military opposition to nuclear diplomacy'. They characterise some policymakers as 'delusional'. They accuse 'the president's own team' (in this case, Barack Obama's) of being 'the biggest roadblock' to the implementation of his policies.<sup>12</sup>

Such demonisation serves public understanding poorly. In his January 2021 inaugural address, President Joe Biden argued that 'politics need not be a raging fire destroying everything in its path. Every disagreement doesn't have to be a cause for total war'. Everyone has a responsibility to restore some civility to our national and international policy debates. It is possible to engage purposefully and passionately in the debates about nuclear deterrence and disarmament while also raising the quality of debate. Tempting though it may be, personal criticism of others must be avoided, even while disagreeing with what they think or the policies they advocate. Speak to the issues, not the personalities. Defend nuclear deterrence from first principles of history, politics and morality and not by attacking the advocates of disarmament, even when they exercise no such restraint. Do not paper over differences; respectfully illuminate them and thereby inform the debate.

## **US Allies and Nuclear Deterrence Advocacy**

These lessons and arguments are crafted from my experience as a policymaker and analyst in the US. Our particular national history as the sole user of nuclear weapons imparts a special obligation on the US for leadership in debates about nuclear deterrence and disarmament. Our historical role as a leader of the international effort to promote international nuclear order also obliges the US to play a constructive role in dealing with twenty-first-century nuclear dangers. Our longstanding role as a security guarantor to others brings with it the expectation of leadership in strategy and policy development. Our aspiration to serve as a model of our values and way of governance creates an additional obligation to tend to the requirements of an informed electorate on these matters.

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12 William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, *The Button: The New Nuclear Arms Race and Presidential Power from Truman to Trump* (Dallas: Ben Bella Books, 2020).

US allies face a similar but not identical set of imperatives and equities. As democratic states, they too must promote an informed electorate. As nations seeking safety under the US nuclear umbrella, they must also help to ensure that US strategy is credible and that US policy is effective. As beneficiaries of a nuclear-backed US security guarantee, they must make a public case for extended deterrence. To do so, they must convey a clear understanding of the role of that umbrella in the current security environment, and of how US nuclear strategy balances near-term deterrence requirements with medium-term risk-reduction goals and long-term disarmament objectives. In Europe, there are some additional imperatives and equities, as some allies there also play a particular role in the practice of US extended nuclear deterrence. They do so by participating in NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements and dual-capable aircraft (DCA) mission (i.e. they own and operate DCA and host on their territories the US nuclear weapons that could be delivered by those aircraft in a time of war). The withdrawal of any one country from the mission could cause the complete collapse of the alliance's unique sharing arrangements—at a time when alliance leaders have repeatedly expressed a commitment to maintain and, if possible, strengthen them. Thus, US allies too would be well served by joining the campaign for nuclear deterrence.

But confronted with the need to engage politically and publicly on these issues, politicians and policymakers in countries allied with the US appear even more reticent than their US counterparts. Their history of engagement is limited and, in some cases, non-existent. In many allied countries, the disarmament constituency is strong and the nuclear deterrence constituency non-existent. In many countries allied with the US, the nuclear debate is mostly a debate about US nuclear policy, which is inadequate.

It is therefore not surprising that most messaging about nuclear policies and nuclear deterrence emanates from alliance mechanisms rather than allied capitals. NATO has had a lot more to say about these matters over the years than most of its member states. Summit communiqués have been especially useful as a mechanism for deterrence messaging, in both Europe and Asia. These are valuable starting points but fall short of effective campaigning.

Allied governments interested in 'upping their game' on deterrence campaigning face many of the same challenges faced by the US, but even more. They do not have even a thin layer of experts sprinkled across the

stakeholder institutions, nor have they invested the resources outside government to enable informed discourse with a deterrence expert community. Finally, they do not have the requirements to conduct policy and posture reviews as they relate to nuclear deterrence.

As a near-term remedy, the US could do more to draw its allies into its own policy and posture reviews. Consultations with allies are now a standard part of US NPRs. But consultation could become substantive collaboration on certain aspects of these reviews. It could also be more purposeful in using formal dialogue mechanisms with allies to advance the development of expertise both inside and outside allied governments.

Over the longer term, however, there can be no substitute for actions by US allies to bolster their capacities for deterrence campaigning. They would be well served by instituting regularised reviews and statements. NATO, for example, could commit to periodic reviews of its deterrence and defence posture, building on the initial (and, so far, only) review conducted in 2012; this would lend continuity of purpose to the alliance's effort to adapt and strengthen its posture in the context of a changing security environment, while also improving the public discourse. It could also commit to a more visible leadership role in the transatlantic deterrence discourse—an approach urged upon it in 2020 by an advisory group on NATO's future commissioned by the alliance's secretary general. Their report urged NATO to:

Better communicate on the key role of nuclear deterrence policy in ensuring the security of the Allies and their populations ... [and] systematically reach out to, and seek to inform, the expert community and civil society.<sup>13</sup>

US alliances in the Indo-Pacific should not wait upon the advice of a future commission to communicate and reach out. At the very least, their defence white papers should set out clearly and concisely the roles of nuclear deterrence and of the US nuclear umbrella in reducing the risk of attack on their most vital interests.

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13 The 'reflection group' appointed by the NATO secretary general issued a report in November 2020 recommending (among many other items) that 'NATO should continue and revitalise the nuclear-sharing arrangements ... The political value of this commitment is as important as the military value it brings'. See *NATO 2030: United for a New Era, Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General*, November 2020, [www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf).

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Neither the interested publics in the US and allied countries nor their elected officials will soon 'learn to love the bomb'. But the public debate about nuclear strategy and policy can be joined and raised in many useful ways. The point of departure must be a thoughtful and comprehensive review of nuclear policy and posture in the context of a broader review of national security strategy and national defence strategy. But much more is required. The case for nuclear deterrence must be made on historical, military and moral terms.

Above all, policymakers seeking to advance a campaign for nuclear deterrence must have reasonable expectations. They can expect to raise the level of debate and to build support for policy. But the debate cannot be 'won'; the debate about nuclear disarmament and nuclear deterrence will not be settled until nuclear weapons are shoved into 'the dustbin of history' (to quote Ronald Reagan), which implies it will be with the US for a long time to come.

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