

Alive and Kicking: The Greatly Exaggerated Death of Nuclear Deterrence

A Response to Nina Tannenwald

J. Peter Scoblic

Despite the radical changes in the global political and military situation in the past ten years, U.S. nuclear forces retain the same mission and the same basic structure they had when Moscow was the seat of the “Evil Empire.” As it has for decades, the United States maintains thousands of nuclear warheads on a variety of land-, sea- and air-based platforms. These forces are on a level of high alert, ready to launch within minutes of an attack warning. It is a distinctly Cold War footing in a world that has long since come in from the cold of U.S.–Soviet antagonism.

The United States has made some significant alterations in its nuclear stance, reducing the number of deployed strategic warheads by about 40 percent and withdrawing most tactical nuclear weapons. But much remains to be done, and the arms control process, which yielded such large returns in the early and mid-1990s, has stalled. Furthermore, from many perspectives the United States seems to be the one that has thrown a wrench in the works. Its October 1999 rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), its failure to ratify a protocol to the START II agreement that would enable strategic forces to be cut in half, and, most glaringly, its plans for a national missile defense threaten the cooperative spirit needed if arms control is to continue to reduce the danger posed by nuclear weapons.

In “U.S. Arms Control Policy in a Time Warp,” Nina Tannenwald argues that, while the United States remains mired in Cold War thinking about nuclear weapons, the global arms control movement has grown to include many players beyond the nuclear-weapon states; progress is increasingly driven by the agenda of middle-power states and nongovernmental organizations; and achieving success in arms control ultimately hinges on changing the way we think about nuclear weapons. But these arguments rest on a more fundamental premise: The United States needs to trade its reliance on the tired concept of nuclear deterrence for the explicit goal of nuclear disarmament. Unless it does so, Tannenwald writes, the stalled arms control process will

likely remain that way, and nuclear proliferation, the most serious threat to U.S. national security, will continue.

Tannenwald's desire for a stronger push toward disarmament is to be commended, but in her interest to stimulate U.S. arms control efforts, she goes after the wrong culprit. Nuclear deterrence, which Tannenwald brands a Cold War artifact, is not the obstacle to arms control progress, and it is not possible—or desirable—simply to abandon it as if it were an unpopular political program. Much progress can be made in reducing the centrality of nuclear weapons in U.S. foreign policy and in drawing closer to the ultimate goal of disarmament, but nuclear deterrence will be an essential part of U.S. security policy as long as nuclear weapons exist.

In an interesting case of politics making strange bedfellows, the argument that deterrence is dead has been advanced by both the most dovish advocates of disarmament and the most hawkish proponents of a national missile defense. Many on both the left and the right seem to agree that deterrence is an outdated concept and that continued adherence to it will weaken U.S. security. These self-styled security innovators maintain that the end of the Cold War means the United States no longer has a nuclear-armed enemy and therefore must no longer subject itself to the “balance of terror” that characterized U.S.-Soviet relations. They argue that nuclear deterrence was a policy designed to deal with a unique set of historical circumstances that have clearly shifted—the world has changed and so, too, must U.S. nuclear doctrine.

Of course, nuclear deterrence was, in some respects, a product of the Cold War. As the United States and the Soviet Union built up their nuclear forces in the years and decades following World War II, the possibility of disarmament faded and the impossibility of thorough and effective defenses against ballistic missiles became clear. Deterrence through the maintenance of a second-strike capability—whereby each state was able to inflict unacceptable damage on the other even after it had been attacked itself—emerged as a relatively stable, if uncomfortable, nuclear *modus operandi* for the superpowers. But, while U.S.-Soviet mutual distrust clearly played a role in the creation of this doctrine, deterrence was a function less of the superpower rivalry than of the very nature of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, that means that the end of the Cold War had no effect on its relevance.

Those who claim that the end of the Cold War has delegitimized deterrence are making an argument based on intentions: because the United States knows with relative certainty that Moscow no longer harbors aggressive intentions, it need not be concerned about Russia's nuclear arsenal. The problem with this train of thinking is that nuclear weapons have such disproportionate military value that a state cannot risk being wrong about another side's intentions. If it were, the results would be catastrophic.

The absence of any room for error means that security policy, when it comes to nuclear weapons at least, must be almost entirely based on an assessment of capabilities.

And the only way to have some modicum of protection against the other side's nuclear capabilities is to have them oneself—to prevent an adversary from using its weapons by being able to retaliate in kind. Deterrence is therefore less a policy decision than it is a necessary framework imposed by the existence of nuclear weapons. This state of affairs may have been more germane in the age of superpower antagonism, but the basic premise has not been challenged by a shift in what social scientists would call situational variables.

There are only two alternatives to the deterrence dilemma. The first is defense, by which a state would not need to threaten the murder of millions in order to avoid victimization itself, but could rather protect its citizens from incoming ICBMs with land- or sea-based interceptors, space- or air-based lasers, or some combination thereof. One flaw in this idea is that because of the catastrophic effects of even one nuclear weapon's piercing the defensive shield, any system would have to be 100 percent effective if it were to replace deterrence completely. That is an impossible level of operational effectiveness for any military system—let alone one as technologically complex as a missile defense.

The more fundamental point is that even if a state were able to build a system that was, initially, perfectly effective, its opponent would make either qualitative or quantitative improvements to its arsenal to guarantee that some of its weapons could get through. The opponent would do this not necessarily because it planned to attack, but because it could not run the risk that the defended state might be able to attack it without fear of retaliation—that it would have a so-called first-strike capability. That offensive buildup would, in turn, lead to a further defensive buildup on the part of the first state, and a destabilizing arms race would have begun. Preventing this inevitable escalation was the rationale for the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty outlawing national missile defenses.

Indeed, such an escalation has been foreshadowed in the international reaction to the Clinton administration's proposal for a limited national missile defense (NMD), which, if it worked as intended, would have the ability to intercept a few dozen incoming warheads, giving the United States some protection against strategic attack.

Russia has adamantly opposed the system because it fears that even a limited NMD could be the first step down a slippery slope to a much more capable system that, in combination with a preemptive strike by the United States, could neutralize its deterrent. China's fears are more immediate than Russia's. Even the limited Clinton system would have the ability to shoot down the few ICBMs China possesses, effectively negating its deterrent and making it a de facto non-nuclear-weapon state vis-à-vis the United States. Russia has threatened to respond to an NMD by withdrawing from strategic arms control agreements, and both Beijing and Moscow have warned that a U.S. NMD would precipitate an arms race.

The new Bush administration, which seems likely to propose a more robust system than that advocated by Clinton, has said the world can be convinced of the

need for a missile defense and the stability it says an NMD would generate. However, most states, including U.S. friends and allies, are not so sanguine. The possibility that a country that already has a preponderance of conventional military power could be working toward a first-strike capability is too threatening for Russia and China to dismiss. Were it possible to assure the integrity of the Russian and Chinese deterrents while defending against rogue states and accidental launches, a limited system might be made acceptable. But it is not yet clear how that could be done.

The other way to dispel the specter of nuclear deterrence is to get rid of all nuclear weapons—to disarm. Tannenwald champions disarmament as an “idea whose time has come,” but, unfortunately, disarmament suffers from a challenge similar to the one that plagues defense: in order for disarmament not to threaten U.S. security dramatically, it too must be 100 percent effective—and verifiably so.

Because of the extreme military advantage nuclear weapons grant their possessors, no nuclear-weapon state can afford the relative loss of power that would come from disarming while another state did not, even if that state’s intentions were thought to be relatively benign. In a disarmed world even a modest nuclear power could be a hegemon. The potential for blackmail would be enormous, and even if each of the nuclear powers believed the others to be well intentioned, their understanding of this situation would breed an almost insurmountable suspicion. A state would need absolute certainty that all others had completely disarmed before it would be willing to do so itself, and absolute certainty is, to say the least, a challenge. No one has yet devised a workable plan to reach it.

“Going to zero,” as total nuclear disarmament is sometimes referred to in arms control circles, is therefore a difficult, if not impossible, proposition. It presents a problem far greater than simply shifting the focus of U.S. arms control policy from “institutionalizing deterrence” toward “sustainable disarmament,” as Tannenwald suggests. If nuclear disarmament is ever to be realized, it will require a series of incremental and verifiable steps and—this is the important part—at each of those steps, deterrence will need to remain credible for all parties. Each arms control step that reduces the arsenals of the nuclear-weapon states will, in fact, need to ensure that deterrence remains institutionalized so as not to destabilize the delicate nuclear balance.

That is not to say that disarmament should not be the ultimate goal of arms control. With a strong collective security system in place and the certainty of retaliation against a defector, it might be possible in the long run to achieve something close enough to 100 percent verification. But that day is a long way off. It is not possible simply to switch the security paradigm from one of deterrence to one of disarmament and then begin to work toward eliminating nuclear weapons. As long as nuclear weapons exist, deterrence will be the order of the day.

Interestingly, Tannenwald seems to acknowledge this point when she mentions that deterrence is needed in the short run and is being jeopardized by U.S. missile defense plans. But it is difficult to reconcile that admission with the rest of her argument.

Tannenwald's assertion that a continued reliance on deterrence will decrease security by encouraging proliferation presents a more challenging line of reasoning. The fact that the United States, Russia, and others maintain nuclear weapons for their security does indeed seem to suggest that these weapons have value and therefore could encourage other states to acquire them. The non-nuclear-weapon states agreed to the inequitable situation codified in the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) with the understanding that it was a temporary measure to prevent proliferation from worsening until the nuclear-weapon states disarmed. But the nuclear-weapon states have not disarmed, and Tannenwald writes that the non-nuclear-weapon states "have become increasingly impatient as the nuclear powers show few signs of willingness to give up their nuclear arsenals."

In theory, the arsenals of the nuclear-weapon states do indicate that nuclear weapons are useful, a conclusion that encourages proliferation. Indeed, the points I have made about the overwhelming military power of nuclear weapons indicate exactly why other states would want to seek them in the absence of nuclear disarmament. The problem is that this pessimism has not been borne out by recent events.

As Tannenwald indicates in her summary of the past decade's arms control accomplishments, many nations that either had or were seeking nuclear weapons disarmed or renounced their nuclear ambitions toward the end of the Cold War. What may need clarification is that many of those nations (such as Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa) renounced their nuclear programs before the United States and Russia had begun reducing their strategic arsenals in 1993 under the START I agreement. These nations apparently thought it was a good idea to give up their nuclear weapons before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and while the two superpowers were still at full nuclear force.

Of course, one could argue that these threshold states felt comfortable denuclearizing because they foresaw that, in the increasingly cooperative spirit of the time, the nuclear powers would soon make great strides toward disarmament, but that they are now reconsidering their decisions because of the stalled nuclear reductions process.

But if the non-nuclear-weapon states are growing impatient, they have shown no signs that they are going to respond by developing nuclear weapons or by withdrawing from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

This year's NPT review conference was widely expected to be a catastrophe, especially from the U.S. perspective. Washington entered the conference on the heels of its rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and amid its fast-moving plans to build a national missile defense in violation of the ABM Treaty. Combined with the U.S. failure to ratify the START II extension protocol and therefore to proceed with

strategic reductions, the U.S. position could easily have been read as a refusal to give up its nuclear arsenal despite its commitments under the NPT.

In the end, however, the conference succeeded beyond even the most optimistic expectations, producing a consensus final document—an impressive achievement under the best of circumstances. Every one of the 158 states that participated in the review conference was able to agree on language characterizing past arms control developments and future arms control goals. The chief concession the United States and the other nuclear-weapon states made was agreeing to “an unequivocal undertaking . . . to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals,” just a stronger wording of the commitment they had made more than thirty years earlier under Article VI of the NPT. The states at the review conference did paper over some of their differences in order to reach a positive outcome; regardless, the NPT regime hardly seems like a system on the verge of collapse.¹

This apparent contradiction between the need for the nuclear-weapon states to maintain their arsenals (and therefore a doctrine of deterrence) and the lack of appeal that nuclear arsenals seem to have to most non-nuclear-weapon states can be explained in several ways: extended nuclear deterrence has eased concerns for some allies of nuclear-weapon states; “negative security assurances,” whereby states that have nuclear weapons promise not to use them against those that do not, have lessened the concerns of other non-nuclear-weapon states; nuclear weapons programs are prohibitively expensive; and it has become clear with the collapse of the Soviet Union that however powerful nuclear weapons are, they are useful for very little other than deterring their use by others.²

Of course, despite the resilience the nonproliferation regime has shown in the past year, the division established by the NPT may not be able to exist indefinitely. Tannenwald does not specify what she means by the “long haul,” but it is possible that if in 2050 the United States and Russia retained the same size nuclear arsenals that they do now, or larger ones, certain states might decide they need nuclear weapons too. But that is difficult to predict, and there is no evidence to suggest that any states not already pursuing a nuclear weapons capability are moving in that direction. The point is that the nonproliferation regime appears to be more stable than Tannenwald suggests.

¹ A distinction should be drawn between the stability of the NPT regime and its success. Saying the NPT is not in imminent danger does not mean it has been completely successful—clearly, it has not. India, Israel, and Pakistan, which never joined the NPT, have nuclear weapons, and Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, which did join, are either trying to develop them or have attempted to do so in the relatively recent past. However, the efforts of each of these six nations substantially predates the current arms control stalemate. India, for example, first tested a nuclear device in 1974. The point is that none of these states have developed nuclear weapons because of increasing frustration with the slow pace of disarmament or perceived contradictions in U.S. security policy in the post-Cold War world.

² For an excellent study of why states choose to give up nuclear weapons or eschew developing them in the first place, see Mitchell Reiss, *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995).

There is a related problem with the argument that the deterrent forces of the nuclear-weapon states spawn proliferation. Tannenwald writes that U.S. superiority, backed in large part by its nuclear arsenal, encourages states to pursue asymmetric means of warfare, such as chemical or biological weapons, which level the battlefield by enabling a relatively weak state to inflict disproportionate damage on an adversary that is conventionally much stronger. This is a good point, but it would still hold true if the United States were to give up its nuclear weapons.

Whatever “message” current nuclear arsenals send about the utility of nuclear weapons, there is no reason to believe that if Russia and the United States gave up nuclear weapons, weaker states would perceive them as less useful. In fact, the opposite is likely to be true. If the nuclear-weapon states disarmed it would only increase the relative value of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the United States has such a preponderance of conventional military force that, even if it did not have nuclear weapons, other states would still need asymmetric means to counter U.S. power, and adversaries might actually be more likely to use them because the United States would not be able to respond with nuclear weapons.

The arms control landscape may indeed be changing to include more features, as Tannenwald suggests, and that may be a good thing. It may also be useful to remove nuclear weapons from a “narrow security discourse,” as recommended by Tannenwald, so that a broader dialogue on the true impact of nuclear weapons can be held. But neither of these developments will help moderate the threat of nuclear weapons unless we realize the essential role that deterrence plays in security and take steps that preserve deterrence while furthering arms control.

To de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in its security policy while maintaining deterrence and, therefore, stability, the United States should remove its strategic forces from high alert; it should ratify the CTBT and commit itself to not developing new types of nuclear weapons; it should consider adopting a minimum deterrent posture that emphasizes that the only function of nuclear weapons in U.S. security policy is retaliatory; it should ratify the START II extension protocol and the amendments to the ABM Treaty; and it should consider further nuclear reductions, either in the context of a START III agreement or as a unilateral move.

Fortunately, it appears that U.S. nuclear weapons issues will receive serious attention this year. President Bush has already ordered a review of U.S. strategic policy, and Congress has mandated that a formal nuclear posture review, which will address all aspects of U.S. nuclear weapons policy, including arms control, be completed by December. Steps like the ones outlined above would preserve deterrence, bring U.S. nuclear policy more in line with post-Cold War political and military realities, jumpstart the arms control process, and help stem proliferation.