

**PERSPECTIVES**

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**THE VITAL PLACE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS  
IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY US NATIONAL SECURITY  
STRATEGY**

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## **The vital place of nuclear weapons in 21<sup>st</sup> century US national security strategy**

**Franklin C. Miller**

Let me begin by making three assertions:

- Nuclear weapons will continue to have a role in US national security policy for the foreseeable future.
- Whether that role is as a backdrop to broader US posture or whether it is more prominent depends upon how friendly or unfriendly the world becomes.
- Government's ability to predict accurately future enemies or potential conflicts is highly suspect.

### **An unfriendly world**

Make no mistake about it: we still live in an unfriendly world. From time to time it begins to look quite Hobbesian. We *want* to believe that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century humankind has evolved to a certain level of civilisation. But then we are daily reminded by savage and barbarous acts, some broadcast over the internet by their perpetrators, how far we really have to go. For those who believe progress is irreversible, the unspeakable crimes committed against one another by those highly cultured and civilised 'Europeans' in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s served as a stark reminder that sometimes civilisation as we know it is only a veneer. It conjured up images of a book most in my generation read in their teens: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

Not all governments think the way the United States does, nor do they share Western political or social ideals. Some of those governments which do not share our outlook maintain and deploy nuclear weapons. Some of them have even, in the past few years, begun publicly threatening their neighbours with those weapons. Others of those governments want nuclear weapons, break their solemn treaty commitments not to acquire them, and will want them whether the United States has nuclear weapons or not. International organisations have proven to be largely ineffective in halting or reversing these illegal activities.

Thus it will fall upon the US government to continue to meet the principal tasks it was created to fulfill by the Founding Fathers, one of which is ‘to provide for the common defence’. This includes preventing a major power from attacking America or seeking to coerce it. In a world in which nuclear weapons will continue to exist, this means that nuclear weapons will continue to have a role in US national security policy – and that the United States will need to maintain a modern and credible nuclear deterrent.

### **The roles of nuclear weapons**

Are nuclear weapons an all-purpose deterrent? Surely not: they never have been. A nuclear response to a cyber attack or an attack in space or a low-intensity attack is hardly credible. Similarly, a nuclear response to non-state terrorism, even an act involving nuclear weapons, is difficult to conceive. But a threatened nuclear response to the threat of nuclear attack or coercion, or a massive conventional assault, or a state use of a weapon of mass destruction is credible. This is not a nostalgic comment reflecting the Cold War; it is a real and necessary fact of life in our present and future world.

US nuclear weapons will continue to serve other additional critical purposes.

They moderate great power behaviour. Consider the number of times Europe’s great powers went to war with one another after 1648, the date when the Treaty of Westphalia ushered the modern nation-state into existence. From 1648 to 1800, there were at least seven significant wars. From 1800 to 1900, there were at least six significant wars, and that includes lumping all the Napoleonic Wars as one and similarly counting the three Wars of Italian Independence as one. In 1914 came the ‘War to End All Wars’, whose massive carnage and destruction of a generation of European males was not sufficient to prevent World War II. And then, suddenly, after 1945, an historic pause.

Did humankind change? Did the nature of governments change? I think not. Rather, war became too dangerous. The nuclear weapon had revolutionised war. No longer could an aggressor government count on the skill of its military leadership to conquer its victims. The nuclear weapon allowed the losing power to turn the victor’s triumph literally to ashes.

In a similar context, our nuclear weapons will provide an additional deterrent for, and assurance to, US allies by:

- protecting the vital interests of those allies whose national security the United States judges vital to its own and to whom, unlike Georgia, America has treaty commitments
- affecting rogue nation behaviour towards American allies in regions of potential conflict, and
- serving as an ‘anti-proliferant’ for allies capable of developing their own nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are not the United States’ only means of providing extended deterrence and assurance: troop presence, exercises and missile defence forces are also important. But the role of US nuclear weapons is unique – and has been so recognised by the December 2008 Schlesinger Task Force for Nuclear Weapons Management, the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force on Nuclear Weapons, and the Perry-Schlesinger Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States. Let us be very clear: our allies face real threats and have real fears. The United States – and the international community – needs to take these into account or face further proliferation.

### **Maintaining an effective deterrent**

Let me close by making a few observations about what it takes to have an effective deterrent. As a member of the Schlesinger Task Force, I would be remiss if I didn’t.

First, the United States must make every effort to understand its adversaries’ or its potential enemies’ leadership. Deterrence is all about holding at risk what potentially hostile governments value. Most importantly, it is *not* about mirror imaging what *we* value. This is not a ‘target coverage exercise’, nor is it deciding that the United States is going to have a counterforce or countervalue strategy – neither of which ever served as US nuclear policy (except during 1947 when our small arsenal and lack of targeting information led us briefly to have a counter-city policy). This requires scholarship translated into capability and requires constant effort. The US government – and in particular the Department of Defense – needs to do much more here.

Second, the United States needs to have a credible force. Although he subsequently disavowed his nuclear policies, Robert S. McNamara, former US Defense Secretary and one of the architects of the doctrine of Flexible Response, actually got it right in 1963 when he

testified to Congress that: ‘... any force that has such characteristics that it cannot be thought of as an operating force cannot serve as a deterrent, and therefore unless one has a force that has capabilities for actual operations and a force for which one has an operational plan, one, in my opinion, does not have a credible deterrent’. What McNamara said to the Senate Armed Services Committee in 1963 remains every bit as true today.

Third, reflecting on my Schlesinger Task Force experience, I must repeat that the Department of Defense must be a good and faithful steward with respect to the United States’ nuclear forces. The Department must display the utmost competence in carrying out all aspects of its nuclear responsibilities.

Fourth, the United States Government must remain confident in its policy and its capabilities – both delivery systems and warheads – and the infrastructure which supports them. And the United States must be confident that its deterrent is always perceived as safe, secure, survivable and capable. If the United States is not confident, and seen to be confident, neither will its potential enemies be deterred, nor its allies assured.

Fifth, the United States must retain forward-based systems in places where its allies (not Washington) view their presence as vital to their security – even if US defence planners believe central strategic systems can do the job.

Sixth, the United States must maintain at least parity in strategic forces with Russia.

Seventh, the United States must never allow strategic forces levels to fall to a point where allies believe the Russian or Chinese theatre nuclear arsenals will affect US commitments or dominate US decision-making in a crisis. The current limits under discussion in the START follow-on context are not an issue in this regard.

## **Conclusion**

In the early 1980s, at the height of the Pershing controversy in Europe, then British Defence Secretary Michael Heseltine gave a speech. In it, he commented on the various headlines of the day and then remarked that the most important story had not been reported on. That story, he said, was: ‘NATO kept the peace again today’.

In the same vein, the United States 'uses' its nuclear weapons every day. They keep the peace. They have kept the peace over the past six decades. They will continue to keep the peace in the future.

Consider just a few of the weapons systems we once deployed: Atlas, Titan, Minuteman 1 and 2, and MX missiles; Polaris, Poseidon and Trident 1 submarines; B-36, B-47 and B-58 bombers. All are now pieces of history, museum pieces. Having been 'used' throughout their lives they are now honorably retired. So too may it be for our current and future systems.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Franklin C. Miller* was formerly a senior official in the US Department of Defense and the National Security Council. He was a member of the Schlesinger Task Force for Nuclear Weapons Management. This paper is based on a presentation to the US Strategic Command First Annual Deterrence Symposium, 29 July 2009.

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