

Not So Scary:  
Nuclear Weapons and the Failure of Deterrence

Name: Mollie Schnurr

Student Number: 0692925

Professor: Philip Giurlando

Course: POST-2280

Date: June 10th, 2021

Nuclear weapons are missiles with massive destructive capabilities. They were first created during World War Two under the Manhattan Project and fired on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>1</sup> Nuclear weapons can flatten cities and send radioactive poisoning to many people. Since World War Two ended, they have never been fired on a target, but are widely seen by states that own nuclear weapons, also called nuclear states, as a form of deterrence. Deterrence theories state that if a nuclear state is attacked they will respond by firing nuclear weapons, making it disadvantageous to attack a nuclear state, and thus deterring attacks. As per the Special Deterrent Situation theory created by Gregory Kavka, nuclear weapons are an effective form of deterrence if they remain unused, but there is a reasonable reason to believe that they would be used if a nuclear state was attacked or threatened.<sup>2</sup> This essay will argue that nuclear weapons are not an effective form of deterrence as nuclear weapons could be owned by unstable groups, and the hesitancy of states to use their arsenals demonstrates a failure of deterrence.

### **Ownership by Unstable Groups**

The first reason why nuclear weapons are not an effective form of deterrence and security is because they either are owned, or have the potential to be owned by unstable states and groups. Theories of nuclear deterrence assume that states are the actors involved with nuclear weapons. However, states such as Pakistan own nuclear weapons with groups like Al-Qaeda attempting to develop them. Rational states have a strong motivation to not use their nuclear weapons as they have morality concerns with targeting civilians and fear mutual self-destruction. Non-rational states or non-state actors do not fear these things, and thus may be more willing to

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Robert Kehler, "Nuclear Weapons & Nuclear Use," *Daedalus* 145, no. 4 (2016): 50, [https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED\\_a\\_00411](https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00411).

<sup>2</sup> Jeff McMahan, "Is Nuclear Deterrence Paradoxical?" *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 407, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381441>.

fire their nuclear weapons. If states are more willing to use their nuclear weapons, then the theory of the Special Deterrent Situation is inactive, as nuclear weapons only hold security power as long as they are unused, but are threatened to be used.<sup>3</sup> Unstable groups such as Pakistan and Al-Qaeda do not have these restrictions on the use of nuclear weapons and thus the weapons are far more likely to be fired, resulting in instability and destruction.

The first example of an unstable state that possesses a nuclear weapon is Pakistan. Pakistan has developed nuclear weapons in an attempt to gain security while being a neighbouring state to the hostile nuclear power of India.<sup>4</sup> Pakistan has a weaker conventional army in comparison to India, and in response to India's military policy, it may be necessary for Pakistan to deploy their nuclear weapons after a small threat under a "use them or lose them policy".<sup>5</sup> This means Pakistan may utilize nuclear weapons before absolutely necessary in an attempt to protect themselves from small invasions. This reactionary military policy makes Pakistan an unstable military state as their early use of nuclear weapons may mean they are fired prematurely or with poor intelligence. Stable nuclear powers would be able to take time to ensure accuracy before firing in order to avoid the damage and instability associated with military action. This demonstrates the instability of Pakistan's nuclear program as they are willing to use their nuclear weapons first, and potentially escalate a conflict.

The second example of an unstable group with the potential to develop a nuclear weapon is Al-Qaeda. Currently, no non-state group has a working nuclear weapon, but there is reason to believe they are seeking this, and that these groups will develop nuclear weapons in the future. Osama Bin Laden, the former leader of Al-Qaeda, stated his group's interest in developing a

---

<sup>3</sup> McMahan, "Is Nuclear Deterrence Paradoxical?" 407.

<sup>4</sup> Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia: Pakistan's Stabilisation-Destabilisation Dilemma," *Strategic Studies* 34, no. 1 (2014): 47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48527554>.

<sup>5</sup> Ghazala Yasmin, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia," 54.

nuclear weapon.<sup>6</sup> The supplies and the specialized knowledge to produce nuclear weapons is monitored, but with experimentation it is possible for terrorist groups to produce a working weapon.<sup>7</sup> Some failing states, such as the Soviet Union, likely leaked nuclear material and know-how to these groups.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the theories behind these weapons are widely available on the internet and likely understandable to a university-level physics student.<sup>9</sup> With enough time and space to test these weapons it is possible these terrorist groups would be able to produce one. This is particularly frightening because they are interested in massive civilian casualties and are willing to participate in suicide missions or dramatic displays of power to achieve their goals.<sup>10</sup> While states may hesitate to deploy a nuclear weapon because of the moral ramifications, a terrorist group is less likely to be deterred by this, thus, once they have developed nuclear weapons they will likely be used.

These two examples demonstrate the danger associated with nuclear weapons brought by unstable states and groups. These groups are far more likely to use their weapons once developed, which would have huge human and environmental costs while increasing instability in the region. As knowledge, materials and interest in nuclear weapons increases, the likelihood of them being used also increases.

### **Nuclear States Hesitancy Mitigates Deterrence**

The second reason why nuclear weapons are not an effective form of deterrence and security is because actors are hesitant and unwilling to use their nuclear arsenals. The theory of the Special Deterrent Situation states that nuclear weapons are only effective as deterrence as

---

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Kelle and Annette Schaper, *Terrorism using biological and nuclear weapons: A critical analysis of risks after 11 September 2001* (Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute, 2003) 16.

<sup>7</sup> Kelle and Schaper, *Terrorism using biological and nuclear weapons*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Bellany, "Outflanking Missile Defences: The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Nuclear Weapons and Terrorism," *Defense & Security Analysis* 28, no. 1 (2012): 84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2012.651381>.

<sup>9</sup> Kelle and Schaper, *Terrorism using biological and nuclear weapons*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Bellany, "Outflanking Missile Defences," 93.

long as they would reasonably be used in a situation of attack or war.<sup>11</sup> If nuclear states do not use their weapons, other states will doubt that these weapons will be used at all, and thus may attack. This makes nuclear weapons not an effective form of deterrence. Nuclear weapons were created during World War Two and were successfully dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the American army.<sup>12</sup> Since World War Two, more countries have developed nuclear weapons but these have never been used again against another state.<sup>13</sup> In order for deterrence to be effective there must be a reasonable belief that nuclear weapons would be used. However, despite opportunities for nuclear use being presented, such as when a non-nuclear group attacks a nuclear state, these weapons remain unused. As non-nuclear groups are willing to attack nuclear states, it demonstrates that nuclear weapons are not an effective deterrent. There were two times when nuclear weapons could have been used, after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, and in the Falkland War between Argentina and the United Kingdom.

The first example of nuclear deterrence not being effective is in the case of 9/11. 9/11 was a series of four attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda on September 11th, 2001.<sup>14</sup> These four attacks were directed at economic and political centers in the United States of America (US) and targeted many civilians on US territory. These attacks were a major threat to the US, a nuclear power. Polls after the attacks indicated more than half of Americans believe these attacks had shaken their “sense of personal safety and security”.<sup>15</sup> Around both the US and the western world in places such as Canada and the United Kingdom, there was an outpouring of support for a

---

<sup>11</sup> McMahan, “Is Nuclear Deterrence Paradoxical?” 407.

<sup>12</sup> Kehler, “Nuclear Weapons & Nuclear Use,” 50.

<sup>13</sup> Kelle and Schaper, *Terrorism using biological and nuclear weapons*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> “9/11 FAQs,” 9/11 Memorial and Museum, <https://www.911memorial.org/911-faqs>.

<sup>15</sup> Todd H. Hall and Andrew A.G Ross, “Affective Politics after 9/11,” *International Organization* 69, no. 4 (2015): 863, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818315000144>.

military reaction to these attacks.<sup>16</sup> However, while a bombing and a military campaign were launched against Afghanistan, a place thought to be harbouring terrorists, no nuclear attack was launched. Al-Qaeda is thought to not have nuclear weapons, thus it was a non-nuclear force attacking a nuclear force.<sup>17</sup> This demonstrates nuclear weapons were not seen as a deterrent for Al-Qaeda as they would have believed nuclear weapons would not be used against them. This demonstrates nuclear weapons do not deter groups from attack.

The second example of nuclear deterrence not being effective is in the war in the Falkland Islands. The Falkland Islands are a group of islands off of the coast of South America, near Argentina that is administered by the United Kingdom (UK).<sup>18</sup> In 1982 Argentina attacked these islands militarily and occupied them in a claim to sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> However, in doing this, they attacked the territory of the UK. The UK responded by sending a Royal Navy task force to recapture the island.<sup>20</sup> The UK however did not respond in a nuclear fashion, despite possessing nuclear weapons. Argentina has never created a nuclear weapon and thus, this war included a non-nuclear power attacking and occupying a nuclear power without any nuclear weapons being discharged.<sup>21</sup> As Argentina was confident enough to attack a nuclear power without fear of nuclear retribution, it demonstrates they did not fear that the UK was going to discharge nuclear weapons, thus meaning a British nuclear weapon was not a form of deterrence.

These two examples demonstrate that nuclear weapons do not deter attacks by non-nuclear powers. Stable state nuclear programs have demonstrated so much hesitancy to use their arsenal that it is not believed that they would be willing to deploy nuclear weapons at all.

---

<sup>16</sup> Hall and Ross, "Affective Politics after 9/11," 865.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Buckley and Rick Fawn. *Global Responses to Terrorism: 9/11, Afghanistan and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2003) 55.

<sup>18</sup> Craig Alexander Snyder, *The Falkland Islands War of 1982: A Legal, Diplomatic and Strategic Evaluation*, (St Catharines: Brock University, 1989) ii.

<sup>19</sup> Snyder, *The Falkland Islands War of 1982*, ii.

<sup>20</sup> Snyder, *The Falkland Islands War of 1982*, iii.

<sup>21</sup> "Argentina." Nuclear Threat Initiative: Countries. <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/argentina/>.

As nuclear weapons remain unused and nuclear powers are attacked, it illustrates that nuclear deterrence does not exist.

## **Rebuttal**

While this essay argues that nuclear deterrence is ineffective, opposing theorists believe that nuclear weapons are effective for security and point to the destructive power of nuclear weapons as evidence. They claim that since nuclear weapons have huge destructive capabilities and create large environmental and human costs, rational actors would not attack states who possess nuclear weapons.<sup>22</sup> This is a theory of nuclear deterrence, as actors would be deterred from attacking out of fear of a nuclear weapon being deployed towards them. While a widely held theory, it has been disproven through past events. As discussed in the previous two sections, not every actor who possesses a nuclear weapon or who seeks one is rational. They may easily deploy weapons in a form of an attack, not deterrence. States who have weapons may also be so hesitant to use them that actors do not believe that nuclear weapons will be used at all, thus meaning deterrence does not exist. The theory of nuclear deterrence is logical, but past actions demonstrate that nuclear deterrence is ineffective.

## **Implications**

Overall, nuclear weapons are not an effective form of deterrence, and do not create increased stability. With this information, states should pursue a policy of attrition, where the building and development of nuclear weapons are halted, and supplies are allowed to dwindle as the weapons are deemed inactive. This would have two main benefits. The first benefit would be through halting development, there would be less raw materials and knowledge available to unstable groups and states. The second benefit would be decreased spending. Nuclear weapons

---

<sup>22</sup> James J. Wirtz, "Chapter 18: Weapons of Mass Destruction," in *Contemporary Security Studies*, ed. Alan Collins, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 262.

are ineffective for states, and their creation and storage is expensive, costing \$72.9 billion in 2019, or \$138,699 a minute globally.<sup>23</sup> If governments stopped building nuclear weapons less knowledge and materials would be available for unstable groups and states, and the costs associated with a nuclear arsenal would decrease.

Possessing nuclear weapons is unnecessary, and dangerous if they fall into the wrong hands. Unstable states and groups such as Pakistan and Al-Qaeda possess, or want to possess, nuclear weapons. The weapons they develop are far more likely to be used. Nuclear weapons, as possessed by nuclear states, remain unused, and their inactivity and hesitancy of use decrease their ability to deter others from attack. As per the theory of the Special Deterrent Situation, nuclear weapons only hold power as long as they remain unused but are believed that they would be used.<sup>24</sup> As groups that are more likely to use nuclear weapons develop them and as many states are unlikely to ever use them, the deterrence system does not exist. The ineffectiveness of nuclear weapons and their dangerous and expensive operating and development costs mean nuclear programmes should be halted.

---

<sup>23</sup> ICAN, *Enough is Enough: 2019 Global Nuclear Weapons Spending* (2017 Nobel Peace Prize, May 2020) 3.

<sup>24</sup> McMahan, "Is Nuclear Deterrence Paradoxical?" 407.



## Bibliography

- Bellany, Ian. "Outflanking Missile Defences: The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Nuclear Weapons and Terrorism." *Defense & Security Analysis* 28, no. 1 (2012): 81–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2012.651381>.
- Buckley, Mary, and Rick Fawn. *Global Responses to Terrorism: 9/11, Afghanistan and Beyond*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Hall, Todd H, and Andrew A.G Ross. "Affective Politics after 9/11." *International Organization* 69, no. 4 (2015): 847–879. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818315000144>.
- ICAN. *Enough is Enough: 2019 Global Nuclear Weapons Spending*. 2017 Nobel Peace Prize, May 2020.
- Jalil, Ghazala Yasmin. "Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia: Pakistan's Stabilisation-Destabilisation Dilemma." *Strategic Studies* 34, no. 1 (2014): 47-73. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48527554>.
- Kehler, C. Robert. "Nuclear Weapons & Nuclear Use." *Daedalus* 145, no. 4 (2016): 50–61. [https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED\\_a\\_00411](https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00411).
- Kelle, Alexander, and Annette Schaper. *Terrorism using biological and nuclear weapons: A critical analysis of risks after 11 September 2001*. Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute, 2003.
- McMahan, Jeff. "Is Nuclear Deterrence Paradoxical?" *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 407–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381441>.
- NTI. "Argentina." Nuclear Threat Initiative: Countries. <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/argentina/>.

Snyder, Craig Alexander. *The Falkland Islands War of 1982: A Legal, Diplomatic and Strategic Evaluation*. St Catherines: Brock University, 1989.

Wirtz, James J. "Chapter 18: Weapons of Mass Destruction." in *Contemporary Security Studies*, edited by Alan Collins. 256-272. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

9/11 Memorial and Museum. "9/11 FAQs." <https://www.911memorial.org/911-faqs>.